Ultimate Coffin Box Set:

Scary Stories that SCREAM to be Read, Vol. 1-6

O. Penn-Coughin

They're Coming For You
Ultimate Coffin Box Set, Vol. 1-6:
Scary Stories that Scream to be Read

by

O. Penn-Coughin

Published by You Come Too Publishing at Smashwords

Text and Illustrations Copyright © 2011 O. Penn-Coughin

You Come Too Publishing

Tombstone of Contents

Book One
Book Two
Book Three
Book Four
Book Five
Book Six

They're Coming For You
Scary Stories that Scream to be Read

by

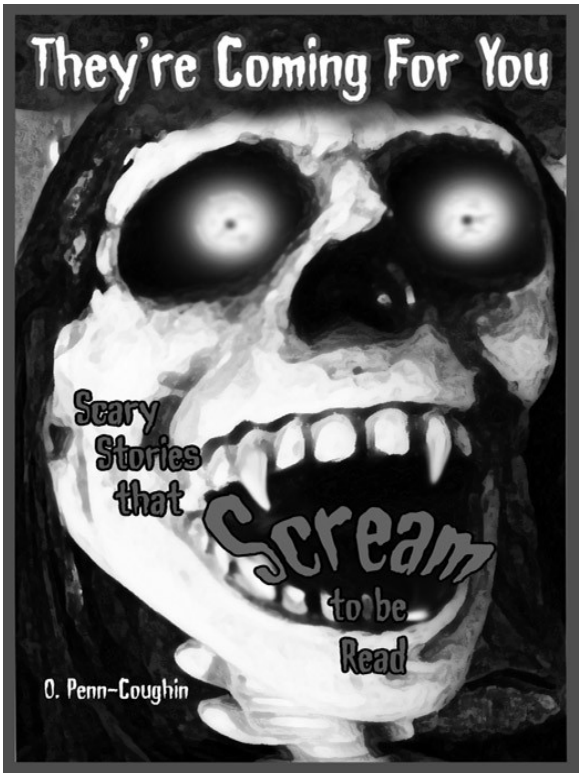
O. Penn-Coughin

Copyright © 2008 O. Penn-Coughin
Text and Illustrations Copyright © 2008 O. Penn-Coughin

You Come Too Publishing

All rights reserved. No part of this book may be used or reproduced without written permission except in the case of brief quotations embodied in critical article and reviews.

for my old students
and the young ghost of my father


They're Coming For You
Scary Stories that Scream to be Read!
O. Penn-Coughin

Introduction

The stories in this book are meant to give you *chicken skin* (as they say in Hawaiian, Dutch, Chinese, and Spanish) and make you laugh, think, shiver, and scream. They can be read in the quiet horror of your own mind or in a group.

Several of the stories include read aloud instructions **[like this]**. And like most things, screaming takes practice. Sometimes it's good to pause at the end like it's over… and then let out an unexpected scream. Or you might want to scream near the beginning or the middle—just because. Other times you could really surprise your audience by having someone else do the yelling.

Some of my personal favorites in this collection involve the use of accents. It's awesome fun to try to sound like a pirate, Southern grave robber, dead pioneer woman, French-Canadian voyageur, Irish soccer fan, or street corner thug. You don't have to use the accents, but they do add a nice touch. And don't be scared of sounding foolish. It's all part of storytelling.

Finally, remember to set the mood by turning down the lights and reading slowly and in a low voice, just above a whisper, until it's time to… SCREAM!

O. Penn-Coughin

El Cuco

"El Cuco comes for children who don't listen to their parents," Juan told Little Johnny again as he kissed his son good night. "*El Cuco* comes for children who stay up past their bedtime. Be strong, my son. Be good."

It was the same story that Juan's father had told him when he was a child. Thousands and thousands of Spanish-speaking children went to bed each night with the story of *El Cuco*. But here in the United States of America you were not supposed to tell such things to little children. The counselors and psychologists said it was not healthy. And Juan's wife agreed.

"Juan, please stop telling him that cuckoo story," she said. "I don't want Little Johnny to have nightmares."

"Yes, dear," Juan said.

Juan loved his son very much and didn't want him to become a mama's boy, *un nene de mamá*. He knew the world was sometimes a cold, hard place and that Little Johnny would have to learn to be tough and hard too. He wanted him to be strong, strong on the inside. But Juan was losing the battle.

Little Johnny wasn't strong. He was soft and flabby and gooey on the inside. He was *un llorón de primera*. A world-class cry baby. Always crying to his mother about every little thing.

"*El Cuco* lives in that hole in the wall over there," Juan told Little Johnny the next night. "He waits for *niños malo* —bad children—and then he comes out for them. Be strong, my son. Be good."

A few minutes later, Little Johnny was knocking on his parent's bedroom door.

"Daddy told me the cuckoo would get me," he cried. "He said it would come out of the hole in the wall."

"Poor baby," his mother said, hugging Little Johnny tightly and giving Juan a dark look. "Silly Daddy will patch that hole and that mean cuckoo won't be able to get you."

The next morning Juan got his putty knife, mixed some plaster, and covered the little hole in the wall. He then painted over it, so that no one would ever be able to tell there had been a hole in the first place.

"The hole is gone," Juan told Little Johnny that night. "But *El Cuco* is still there. Be strong, my son. Be good."

"No, you said it lives in the hole and the hole is gone," Little Johnny said. "No more cuckoo."

"Be careful what you say," Juan warned. "The only way to keep *El Cuco* away is to be strong, to be good."

"Cuckoo all gone," Little Johnny teased as he jumped and danced on the bed. "Cuckoo can't get me. Cuckoo can't get me."

That night Little Johnny heard a muffled sound coming from inside the wall where the hole used to be.

"I'm coming for you, *niño malo*," a voice said.

There was scratching and pounding and pounding and scratching as plaster and dust and dust and plaster fell from the wall. Little Johnny was too scared to look, too scared to cry, too scared even to wet the bed.

"I don't like bad little boys," the voice said, now free from the wall. "You should have listened to your *papá*. *Pero es demasiado tarde ahora*. It's too late now.

"Oh, you know what else I don't like?" the voice whispered into Little Johnny's terrified ear. "I really don't like to be called cuckoo. My name is *El Cuco*!"

El Cuco opened up a large sack filled with other bad children and dropped Little Johnny inside.

Then he was gone.

The next morning Little Johnny was gone too. But the hole in the wall was back.

Welcome to the Neighborhood

Farewell Bend Cemetery was on the outskirts of town. It was a pioneer cemetery, and most of the graves were well over a hundred years old. Some of the people who had built the little town were buried there too, Mrs. Bunk had told the class. The graveyard was full of history.

The class of 28 fourth graders stood in front of the gates of the cemetery. This was one crazy field trip, Allen Rivers thought. And the trip over was crazy too. Because the cemetery was only a few blocks away from the school, the class had walked instead of taking a bus. They had to walk along the busy highway that cut through the middle of town, but they all made it to the cemetery safely.

Mrs. Bunk began to talk about the pioneers and all the hardships they went through on their journey out west, but Allen wasn't listening. He was getting his camera out of his backpack. His grandpa had given him an ancient camera last week and this would be a perfect place to try it out. It was even loaded with a roll of film, just like in the old days. He was excited that he would be able to use this creepy camera in this creepy place.

When Mrs. Bunk stopped talking, the kids were allowed to wander around and read the epitaphs. Allen ran through the cemetery like a wild horse, taking pictures of his classmates and yelling "look this way, this way" over and over again.

Then Allen ran up to a large, moss-covered tombstone where a girl was standing by herself.

"Hey," he yelled, "let me take your picture with that cool tombstone."

The girl didn't answer. He didn't recognize her, but maybe she was a new student. Or maybe she was visiting the cemetery with her parents.

"Don't be such a grump!" Allen said. "You might as well look this way." Click. "Ha! That will show you. I got your picture!"

The girl wore a somber expression and stared at Allen with large, black eyes. He backed away, but her hate-filled glare followed him. He then turned from her and ran, but he could still feel the girl's eyes on his back all the way across the cemetery. It wasn't until he got to the front gate and rejoined his friends that he felt those piercing eyes were finally off him. Sure enough, when he turned around, he saw that the girl was gone.

The students sat on the grass and ate lunch from brown paper bags. Allen nervously looked around for the new girl but couldn't find her anywhere. He was actually happy when Mrs. Bunk told them they were heading back to school. This place was giving him the creeps.

The class walked single file along the busy traffic of the highway. It was loud. Allen couldn't wait to give his mom the roll of film that he had finished and get his pictures developed. Maybe he could bring them to school the next day.

Suddenly the hairs on the back of his neck stood up. That strange girl in the cemetery—those dark, terrible eyes—he could sense her watching him again even though the graveyard was far behind them now.

A sick feeling flooded his stomach. Allen turned around, but she wasn't there. Still not convinced, he stepped out onto the road to get a better look.

The truck driver had no time to stop. Allen Rivers died instantly. Somehow the old camera survived the accident, landing in a nearby field.

Months later Allen's mother took the film in and had it developed. Although it was hard for her to look at the photographs of classmates posing and smiling in the graveyard, it did make her happy that Allen had a fun day. But then she came across the very last picture. She let out a tortured scream and then fainted on the spot.

Standing next to a large, mossy tombstone, a wraith-like little girl was staring straight into the camera with the most evil, dark eyes. But that wasn't the worst part. The worst part was that the tombstone read *Allen Rivers, Rest in Peace*.

RIP

Into the Woods

For years her dad would look out the kitchen window into the dark forest that was just past their backyard and say the same thing.

"Never, ever, ever go out into those woods alone." He snapped his head around toward Amy and stared at her with those black eyes. "Do you hear me? *Never*."

When she promised that she would never go there, he turned back to the window, lost in thought.

Most years Amy had never even thought about the woods. When she was younger she liked to jump on the trampoline and roller skate down their long driveway. When she was nine she liked to shoot hoops with her friends and go to sleepovers.

But now Amy was 11. She was 11 and she liked to think about things and sometimes be by herself. She really loved to draw and spent her weekends sketching. She was especially good at drawing flowers and trees and couldn't help thinking about all those giant trees in the woods.

One Saturday in April, her dad left Amy alone because he had to visit a sick friend who lived far away. He said he wouldn't be back until late and was gone when she woke up. After lunch she walked to the kitchen window and stared out.

"I'm not afraid of those woods," she said. Soon Amy had her art supplies and stood at the edge of the backyard, looking into the shady forest.

The deeper she went into the woods, the more beautiful the trees became. Eventually, Amy found a large boulder to sit on and started drawing. Time went by fast. Five or six pictures later, she glanced up and noticed the sun had grown hazy and soft and had fallen down low, peeking through only a few trees.

Although her dad wouldn't be back for a few hours, it was time for her to start back home. She packed up her pencils and jumped down from the rock.

As Amy walked through the forest, nothing looked familiar. The trees grew darker, becoming large silhouettes that surrounded her path. She started to worry. Everything looked the same and it felt like she was going in circles. Her mouth dried up and she was getting cold. She started to cry.

Suddenly a little boy came out from behind a tree. He was wearing muddy jeans and a large, dirty T-shirt. His pale face was the only brightness in the entire woods.

"Why are you crying?" he asked.

"I need to get home but I think I'm lost," she said. "Do you know where Stansbury Road is?"

"Take my hand," he said.

Amy took the boy's cold, little hand and they walked together through the dark forest. She had to walk slowly because his legs were so short. But she didn't mind. It was good to have some company.

"Have you been playing out here today?" she asked, remembering his dirty clothes.

"I've been out here all day," he said. "But not playing."

The boy seemed to know where he was going. Soon they saw a light in the distance.

"Yes!" Amy whispered in joy. "We must be close!"

She squeezed his little hand tighter as they walked toward the light. But as they got closer she saw that they had not come upon a house, but rather a bright lantern sitting near a mound of dirt.

There was a dark, sinister figure digging a hole in the ground. They walked up quietly, not getting too close.

"Hey," she whispered. "What's going on?"

The little boy was quiet, standing still. She looked at him and saw that his face was even whiter now, brilliantly shining against the darkness like a large harvest moon at midnight. Tears started falling from Amy's eyes again as the sound of the shovel hit the dirt in an eerie rhythm.

"Where did you bring me?" she asked**.**

"This is where *it* killed me," was all that the boy said before disappearing down into the very ground he was standing on.

Then the lantern went out, leaving Amy alone in the dark woods with *it.*

[Now SCREAM for your life!]

You Come Too

"Stupid, stupid, stupid, stupid, stupid, stupid, stupid, stupid, stupid smelly ol' sub," Megan mumbled as she watched the other kids play outside.

Megan hated old, mean Mrs. Crankshaft because she was old and because she was mean. But mostly she hated her because she was smelly.

There were always bad things to smell at school: the lunch lady's awful offerings, the stench of those sweaty boys after recess, the kid whose underwear died last Tuesday without anyone bothering to bury it. The list went on and on.

But Mrs. Crankshaft took the cake when it came to bad smells. She took the cake and spread some nasty frosting all over it. Woo-wee!

That being the case, Megan thought it would be appropriate to make farting noises when the old woman walked by. She put the back part of her hand to her mouth and let one fly. A few of the kids giggled.

However, it seemed Mrs. Crankshaft still had some life in her because she spun around quickly, squinted right at Megan, and whispered, "You just won an all-expenses-paid trip to recess in here with me."

So Megan spent recess looking out the window and mumbling under her breath.

"Stupid, stupid, stupid, stupid, stupid, stupid, stupid, stupid, stupid smelly ol' sub," she said to herself over and over again. But the last time she said it, Mrs. Crankshaft interrupted her.

"What did you say, girl?"

Megan turned around to tell some lie but stopped. Mrs. Crankshaft was staring at her with small, terrible eyes. Then the eyes got as big as golf balls. And then they were gone. Suddenly Mrs. Crankshaft keeled over onto the desk face first.

An ambulance came to take the old woman away, followed by every counselor in a 50-mile radius, and then the kids were sent home early.

"Are you all right, Megan?" her mom asked later.

"Yeah, I'm fine," she said.

That night Megan woke up to the sound of the floor creaking. In the darkness of the bedroom, she could see her mom standing in the doorway.

"Mom, I told you I'm fine," she said. "I don't care about Mrs. Crankshaft. I just want to sleep."

Megan's mom didn't answer. Then, suddenly, the most horrible smell filled the room. It was that nasty frosting smell.

"Mom?" Megan said in a shaky voice.

The smell just grew stronger, and then the figure began to move towards the bed.

"I heard what you said, guuurl!" A muddy, dark voice gurgled. "Call for your mommy if you think it'll help!"

Megan tried to scream but gagged on the smell and the fear.

The next morning an ambulance came and took Megan away. She would be spending recess with the sub again. Mrs. Crankshaft had saved her a place right next to her at the morgue.

It's accent time. A pioneer twang perhaps. These people came from all over, so you pretty much can't miss.

Yo Mama's Right Here

The figure rose out of the water. The wet, black dress pressed in on her bony body. The tattered, black bonnet surrounded what had once been a face. Rotting, gray flesh with teeth and bone showing through. Empty, dark holes where the eyes used to be. Her hands reached out blindly for her dead child.

"Baby, come to meeeeee…" she moaned. "Yo mama's right heeeeeere."

With a scream, Jacob Brown woke up from his nightmare.

"Jacob, what's wrong?" his wife Mary asked.

"Bad dream is all," Jacob said, wiping the sweat off his face. "Get back to sleep now."

Tomorrow they would be crossing the Green River. Jacob always had trouble sleeping before crossings. To get an early start in the morning, the wagon train had camped near the river. Jacob could hear the sound of the dark water that was waiting for them.

"I would sooner rastle a bear than tangle with them waters," he thought.

But Jacob knew that if the family was going to get to the green farmlands of Oregon, they were going to have to cross this river. They had crossed others, and there would be more ahead.

He got up, pulled his boots on, and walked down to the river. Dawn still felt hours away. The moon did little to brighten the water or Jacob's troubled mind. After a while he walked back to the wagons.

In the morning a tired Jacob hitched the oxen to the wagon and smiled when he saw his three young children running around. Things were always better in the morning.

"Git on up here, you rascals," he told them. "It's time to go."

In the distance, dark clouds colored the sky. But overhead it was blue as the first wagons began to cross the river.

One behind the other, the heavy wagons moved slowly through the water, each making it safely to the other side. Finally it was their turn.

"Yaw!" Jacob shouted to the oxen. "Do work!"

By now the sky above had turned much darker and the water had begun to rise. The river was moving faster than when the first wagons crossed.

At first Jacob thought it was just his tired mind playing tricks on him. He could barely hear it above the noise of the rushing water.

"Baby, come to meeeeee…" it moaned softly. "Yo mama's right heeeeeere."

Jacob swallowed hard and continued to drive the team. The animals did their best, but to Jacob it felt like giant snails were pulling the wagon. The force of the water made it harder and harder to keep on course. It started to rain.

And then Jacob heard it again. She was closer and louder now, and Jacob had no doubt she was real.

"Baby, come to meeeeee…" she called again. "Yo mama's right heeeeeere."

Through chattering teeth, Jacob urged the team forward.

"Y-y-y-yaw!" he ordered in a shaky voice. "G-g-g-git going!"

The minutes seemed like hours, but through the now-pouring rain Jacob could see the shore ahead getting closer. He almost smiled at the thought that they would make it.

And then it happened. It happened just like in his dream.

Something rose out of the water right in front of the oxen. The wet, black dress pressed in on her bony body. The tattered, black bonnet surrounded what had once been a face. Rotting, gray flesh with teeth and bone showing through. Empty, dark holes where the eyes used to be. Hands reaching out blindly in front of her.

"Baby, come to meeeeee…" she moaned loudly. "Yo mama's right heeeeeere."

Suddenly, as Jacob screamed, the wagon hit a submerged boulder and rose in the air. Then, as Mary and the children screamed, the wagon tipped over. Jacob fell into the water and was carried downriver.

The last thing he saw before disappearing forever under the cold, black water was the woman floating above the wagon.

“Baby, come to meeeeee. Yo mama’s ri—”

[Now quickly shout: AAAH!]

***

Crossing rivers along the Oregon Trail was dangerous. Hundreds of pioneers drowned trying to cross the Kansas, North Platte, and Columbia Rivers—among others. In 1850 alone, 37 people drowned attempting to cross the Green River in Wyoming.

Little Plastic Guitar

Steve Reynolds had been resting in peace for more than 30 years now.

He had long ago given up on the dream of making it into the Rock and Roll Hall of Fame. He knew his songs were not classics. He had just done the best he could. And he had some fun along the way. Sure, like any other ghost he had some regrets. Mostly he wished he had not been driving so fast that night—that *last* night.

"But what's done is done, son," he told himself.

Lately, though, Steve had been doing a lot of tossing and turning in his grave. Back in the other world, one of Steve's songs had been included in the latest version of the *Little Plastic Guitar Superstar* video game.

At first Steve was mildly excited by the news. But then kids all over the other world started disrespecting his song.

"That song smells worse than a room full of angry bleu cheese farts," French children moaned.

"Nastier than your hairy uncle's armpits," the youngsters of Uruguay groaned.

"Total Godzilla poop," Japanese kids intoned.

Steve did his best not to lose sleep over it. But the little stinkers were relentless. Eventually, Steve got pretty livid. Then Steve got extra livid.

He knew he didn't have enough pull to put a complete stop to his misery. But a friend of a friend of a friend had done a favor for a man who could arrange it so that Steve could teach one little kid a lesson he would not soon forget.

Steve waited for the next insult to come his way. As it turned out, he didn't have to wait too long...

"Don't eat all the candy at once," Dickie's mom shouted.

"I won't," Dickie shouted back with his pie hole full of candy as he fingered the little plastic guitar.

"Not this song again," Dickie groaned. "This song is pure *caca*."

Not long after beating the game on normal level, Dickie fell asleep. His numb fingers were still twitching as the drool ran down his chocolate-smeared face. And then he had the most terrible nightmare.

Dickie found himself in the game as part of the crowd. The band was playing the song—*that song*—and everyone, including Dickie, was loving it. He was like a puppet being controlled by someone else. Hard as he tried, he couldn't keep from pumping his fist into the air and shouting "YEAH! YEAH! YEAH!" over and over and over again.

It was hard to judge how much time had gone by, but it felt like hours.

"Wake up, wake up," Dickie whimpered as he slumped in his chair. "Make it stop. Just make it stop."

But Dickie couldn't wake up. And he couldn't make it stop. He was trapped. Trapped inside the game. Trapped inside that song. Trapped inside his little, screaming mind.

Cozy in his grave, Steve Reynolds was smiling. The little punk seemed to be having such an awful time that Steve figured there was no hurry in ending the nightmare anytime soon.

"Be cool, my man," he yawned. "Keep a rockin'."

He stretched his ghostly limbs and, for the first time since the game hit the stores, Steve slept like a baby.

Run for Your Life

Sarah hated her job at the mall. That was one reason she liked the track so much. By the time she finished a run, Sarah had usually forgotten about her idiot boss and all those annoying customers.

"The customer is always right," her boss would repeat. All Sarah knew was that sometimes they gave her a pain in the neck that was actually about two feet below her neck.

So every day after work, Sarah changed into her running clothes and shoes and drove over to the high school track near her home.

Another thing that was cool about the track was that few people used it. It was great to be outside and away from the crowds of the mall. But today was different.

Sarah was surprised to see more than 20 people going around in circles in the growing twilight. She was there a little later than usual because she had worked some extra hours.

"I guess it's more popular at this time," thought Sarah as she began warming up.

After a few laps, Sarah felt a sharp pain in her stomach. It was normal to have a few aches and pains at the beginning of a run. They usually just went away after a while. But this pain was getting worse. Then a terrible, burning burp came up Sarah's throat.

"That spaghetti sauce is trying to kill me," she said out loud, remembering what she had for lunch.

Sarah slowed down and began walking. For the first time since she arrived, she began looking closely at the people going around the track. They were all walking slowly, and they were all dressed in church clothes.

"What a bunch of freaks," Sarah thought.

She began to run again, but it was no use. The pain wouldn't let her. Sarah was now moving as slowly as the others.

Soon an old man in a brown suit started walking next to her. Sarah noticed that his face was very pale. But there was something strangely familiar about it.

"Saraaaaah," he said. "I have something to tell yooooouuu…"

Sarah stopped and began to ask him how he knew her name, but then as the old man turned to face her she saw that the other half of his face was completely eaten away.

Screaming, Sarah started running.

Forgetting about the pain, she ran as fast as she could. She ran to the parking lot. But her car wasn't there.

So she kept running. She ran and ran and ran. She finally looked over her shoulder, hoping that the old man wasn't somehow chasing her. There was no one there.

Sarah began to slow down, and then she saw her car up ahead in the middle of the street surrounded by a group of people. Suddenly she remembered who the old man's horrible face belonged to.

"Grandpa," she gasped. "But… he's been dead for 10 years."

The pain in her stomach came back stronger than ever as Sarah wobbled down the street.

She seemed to float past the crowd surrounding her car.

As she looked in through the cracked glass, Sarah saw herself. Her lifeless body was crushed under the steering wheel. Her eyes were open but saw nothing. And there was a dark, growing stain over her stomach that wasn't just spaghetti sauce.

Shot in the Gas Station

Chuck sat on the gas station toilet near the Montana-North Dakota border. He hated using these stinky public bathrooms as much as he hated using the ones at his school back in Oregon. But since his family was driving to visit his grandparents in Minnesota, Chuck didn't really have much choice. So there he sat on the silly tissue-paper seat cover, trying to hold his breath and make some sense of the primitive poetry on the stall walls at the same time.

"Here I sit broken hearted, paid a quarter and only..."

Suddenly Chuck felt a terrible pain cut through his left butt cheek. Water squirted out of his eyes and a voice he didn't recognize exploded from his throat. "Blast you, Cruzatte, you have shot me! You have SHOT ME!"

Chuck woke up on the cold, dirty tile floor, his mind separated from any sense of time or place. He thought he heard the sounds of a fiddle playing in the distance.

After a while Chuck reached down with his hand to check for damages, afraid of what he'd find. There was nothing there. And the pain was gone like the whole thing had never happened. Chuck got up slowly and shakily stumbled over to the sink. He washed his hands and wiped his tear-stained face. When he looked up, there in the mirror looking back at him was a bearded man with a patch over one eye wearing clothes made of animal fur. He smiled sheepishly through dirty teeth, a twinkle in his eye. And then he was gone.

"That was fast," his dad said sarcastically when Chuck finally made it back to the car. "You open up a bakery in there?"

A few miles down the road, Chuck's dad stopped the car at the historical display next to the highway.

To his astonishment, Chuck learned that the gas station had been built near the site where something astounding had happened 200 years earlier. It was close to the very spot where Pierre Cruzatte, the Lewis and Clark Expedition's one-eyed fiddle player, had accidentally shot Meriwether Lewis in the left buttock. It said that Lewis made a full recovery.

"All's well that ENDS well, eh, Chuck?" his father joked as his mom and little sister giggled. Pale as a ghost, Chuck felt his pants grow wet.

***

The historical aspects of this story are true. Lewis and Private Cruzatte were elk hunting at the time. At first Lewis thought Cruzatte—whose one good eye was not all that good—had shot him. Then he thought it must be Indians. Later Cruzatte denied having shot the captain. But Lewis found the bullet in his pants. It was the same type as Cruzatte had in his rifle.

One more thing: Since Lewis was the group's medic, he had to patch his painful wound himself. The man who helped him off with his pants was named Gass—Sergeant Patrick Gass.

It's time to pull out that French accent. Or if you want to get technical, that French-Canadian accent.

The Old Woman

Many years ago now, when I was a little boy, my grandfather he say to me this story.

Long before the railroad and the automobile and the jet plane, there was the canoe and the voyageurs. Transporting the beaver fur from the vast Canadian wilderness through dangerous rivers, windy lakes, and hungry mosquitoes was the work of the men of the north. My grandfather was one such man.

On this particular trip coming back down the river Churchill heavy with beaver skins, a new paddler he joined my grandfather's crew. Now Julien LeCoq he put his back into the long day of paddling and portaging and portaging and paddling. And the boss he say Julien LeCoq could run the rapids that would make other men go poo poo in their *pantalon*.

Still, the other men did not like Julien LeCoq. There was something about him, though what it was for sure *mon grand pere*, my grandfather, he could not say. Perhaps it was that he paddled silently, not singing like the other men. Or *se possible* it was the way he was always looking around with large, nervous eyes, like he was waiting for something to happen.

Nobody had ever seen eyes like the eyes of Julien LeCoq.

As the voyage she go on, Julien LeCoq began to act more and more bizarre. He stopped sleeping and began talking about *la vieille femme*, the old woman. Always *la vieille femme*.

"The old woman" was the name the voyageurs gave to the wind. You see, the wind she is the great enemy of the man who travels by canoe.

[Make wind sounds.]

One night Julien LeCoq began to whisper, "*La vieille femme vient pour moi. Le mort vient pour moi*. The old woman she is coming for me. Death she is coming for me."

And the next day Julien LeCoq he began to croon.

"*La vieille femme vient pour moi! Le mort vient pour moi!*" he sang in a high, shaky voice as he paddled. "The old woman she is coming for me. Death she is coming for me."

[Make wind sounds.]

The trip and Julien they continue in this fashion for many days and nights with the sleepless obsession of *la vieille femme*.

Finalement, finally you would say, one night the group is on a little island at the end of a huge lake and the wind she begin to blow with great anger. The lake was a terrible ocean of waves. It was useless to try and make the fire. The men they were happy to have a break from the mosquito and the black fly, but they were no so happy to have no hot food.

[Make wind sounds.]

One of the men, trying only to have a little fun, he say to Julien, "The old woman she is blowing tonight, no, Julien? The big lake is quite angry. Heh, heh, heh."

But Julien, his eyes all *rouge* — how you say? red — he fail to see the humor and threw himself on the man, screaming "*La vieille femme vient pour moi! Le mort vient pour moi!*" He would have killed that man if the others had not pulled him off.

My grandfather he did his best to calm down the poor fellow. He say to him, "*C'est seulement le vent*, Julien. It is only the wind."

But it was no use. Julien LeCoq he pulled away and ran into the woods behind the camp, screaming as he went.

"*La vieille femme vient pour moi! Le mort vient pour moi!* The old woman she is coming for meeeeee..."

And then his tortured voice it disappeared into the black night and the crying of the old woman.

[Make wind sounds.]

The next morning the wind she is gone and Julien he no return. The other men say, "Yoohoo, Julien? Where are you? Where are you hiding to? Yoohoo, Julien?"

Julien still he had to be on the little island. But after searching and searching, they could not find him.

And so the voyage she go on without Julien LeCoq.

The voyageurs paddled all day to cross the giant lake, not even stopping once to smoke the pipe. As they were approaching the far shore, each man thought he could hear the whispering of Julien LeCoq. It was only their imagination. That is what they say to themselves.

"*La vieille femme vient pour moi. Le mort vient pour moi*."

[Make wind sounds.]

And then they saw him — or what was left of him — sitting against a big rock. The unforgettable eyes staring out at the sky, staring out from the skeleton of Julien LeCoq! All that was left were those eyes still in the skull and the bones, bones burned and black as the night.

There was no sign of a campfire, and there was no explanation for how Julien LeCoq could have crossed that gigantic lake.

Though exhausted, the men paddled long into the darkness that silent night. Through all the miles and all the years after that, my grandfather he was never able to forget the song of Julien LeCoq.

"*La vieille femme vient pour moi. Le mort vient pour moi*."

Listen. Do you not hear?

The old woman she is dancing tonight.

[Make wind sounds.]

La vieille femme vient pour moi…

[Make wind sounds.]

[Suddenly turn to someone and shout…]

*Et pour **VOUS!***

This one should be told in an Irish accent. If your brogue fails you, try for a pirate.

The Ghost of Jimmie

There was an old football field on the east side of Killarney that was said to be haunted. Nobody wanted to play there. The local lads always won because the visiting players spent all their time worrying about seeing the ghost of Jimmie Concannon or, what was almost as bad, actually seeing the ghost of Jimmie Concannon. By the time the game started, them pitiful lads were as sick as a small hospital and so worked up that even their lunches ran a screamin' out of their bodies through the nearest exit, if you know what I mean.

As for why Jimmie Concannon haunted this particular field, nobody knew. Or if they did, they weren't wagging their chins about it. Not to speak ill of the dead, but poor Jimmie was the worst football player that ever was. It was said he was so feeble, he couldn't find a green crayon in a box full of green crayons. So maybe he was just trying to get in some extra practice, is all.

In any case, on this one fierce Saturday afternoon in October, it was, the wind was having its way with the dyin' leaves and there's a game afoot and a brave little striker is dribbling the ball down all by his lonesome with only the keeper to beat when suddenly he sees the ghost of Jimmie Concannon, all white and bony he, still in his uni, flesh a droppin' off his face, screaming for the ball.

"I'm open! I'm oooooooopen!" Jimmie wails, shaking his bony arms in the air. "I'm ooooooopen!"

Well, that brave lad's backbone turns to potato soup, it does, and he forgets about the ball and the goal and the fact that Macgillycuddy's Reeks are the tallest mountains in all of Ireland—and come to think of it, wouldn't it be lovely to be takin' a stroll among the clover there right about now, don't you know—and that lad, why, he turns white as, well, he turns white as Jimmy is what he turns, and faints right there on the edge of the goal box.

The following week another brave little lad from a neighborin' brave little county is driving in on net, keeping his head down, hoping against hope not to lose his nerve, when there appears Jimmy again, all white and bony he, with a snake where his tongue should be, up to his usual shenanigans, yelling for the ball.

"I'm open! I'm oooooooopen!" he moans, pointing to the spot on the ground in front of his left boot. "I'm oooooooopen!"

Well, that brave lad's legs turn to cabbage stew, they do, and he forgets about the ball and the goal and the fact that Mary had a little lamb—and come to think of it, no one has seen that lamb since McSorley opened his restaurant, don't you know—and that lad, why, his hair turns white as, well, it turns as white as Jimmie is what it turns, and he drops to the pitch and curls up like a wee little baby, he does, cryin' for his mother.

So on the last game of the season, it comes down to this for all the potatoes, and the score be tied at nil with time a dyin', and here comes this brave lad from another brave little part of the Emerald Isle and, Saints preserve us, if that's not the ghost of Jimmie Concannon standing there, right there to the left of the keeper, all white and bony he, except for the blood-red hair, and he's a callin' for the ball.

"I'm open! I'm oooooooopen!" he groans, a most terrible look in his eye. "I'm oooooooopen!"

Well, that brave lad's heart turns harder than Mrs. O'Leary's week-old soda bread, it does, and he stays focused on the ball and the goal and the fact that shots never taken never find the back o' the net—and come to think of it, wouldn't it be glorious to score in the last minute of play and do a wee little jig for all to see, don't you know—and that brave lad, why, he shoots and... He SCORES!

Ah, 'twas a bleedin'-bloody-brilliant thing to behold, it was.

Shortly thereafter, the referee blows his whistle three times, and it's all over. As the broken-hearted crowd departs the stadium, now a silent graveyard of dead dreams, the only sounds heard are the whoopin' and a hollerin' of the visiting lads as they jump up and down in the middle of the pitch. And Jimmie, poor Jimmie, not at all pleased, is still haunting our hero.

"I was open!" Jimmie cries, cryin' big worm-green tears. "I was ooooooopen! Why did you not pass me the ball, you rotten toadstooooool?"

"Calm yourself, Jimmie," the lad says with a smile in his voice. "I would have gladly passed you the ball, but you were clearly *offside*."

[*Alternate Ending*:]

"Calm yourself, Jimmie," the lad says with a smile in his voice. "I would have gladly passed you the ball, but I was too scared."

"Scared of meeeeeee?" Jimmie sobs.

"No," the lad says shaking his head. "Scared that you'd miss."

BAD snOMEN

"A snowman doesn't have blood coming out of its eyes," Mr. White had said with disgust in his voice. "What were you thinking?"

Having recently arrived from Panama, what 7-year-old Carlos was thinking was that he had never seen snow, let alone a snowman. He was also wondering why he had to stay in at recess to write a letter of apology for drawing a green-haired, red-eyed snowman. But his mother had said to listen to the teacher, so the young boy didn't complain and wrote his little letter as best he could.

"mi sorry mi make A BAD snOMEN," it said. "it NO will hapen aGen nOw."

Mr. White threw the letter down on his desk and shook his head. At least it was Friday, he thought.

That day was the last time anyone at the school saw Mr. White. Over the weekend there was a horrible skiing accident. Going full speed, Mr. White flew over a hill and crashed almost halfway up a tree. Branches as sharp as knives punctured both eyes, killing him instantly.

Early Monday morning a scream came from Mr. White's empty room. The other teachers found the principal passed out on the floor by the teacher's desk. In one hand she held the drawing. In the other, the little boy's warning.

Checked Out

It was a big, cold house with no television. But Raven's mom always said the same thing.

"Just for an hour. We need to visit Aunt Ruby."

Lately, Aunt Ruby stayed in bed upstairs during the visits. After a little while, her mom would tell Raven to wait downstairs in the library.

The library was large and dusty, with a stench of old, rotting wood. Raven would listen to her music, play with her pocket video game, and hope for the time to tick by quickly.

But one day she began looking at the books on the shelves. She hadn't ever paid much attention to them before and now noticed that they all looked the same, with brown leather covers and gold titles. There were hundreds and hundreds of them that lined three walls of the room. She had heard of some of the books, like *Moby Dick* and *The Great Gatsby*. But as tunes blasted in her ears, she came across one rather strange book on the bottom shelf. She pulled it out.

It looked exactly like the other books, like it had been there for centuries. But the title was different.

Raven Wilson. That was her name! She took the book over to a large chair and opened it. Turning off her music, she started reading the typed print.

October 16: *Raven is born.*

She flipped ahead a little.

April 17: *Grandma dies and Raven pretends to be sad.*

"Hey, who wrote this?" Raven whispered to the book. A queasy feeling washed over her. She turned the page and kept reading.

September 22: *Raven breaks lil' Andre's crayons in half. When he starts to cry, she tells him he should be happy because now he has twice as many as before.*

May 29: *Raven gets mad and throws her mom's favorite Nina Simone record on the roof.*

Raven dropped the book into her lap. She was now sweating in the cold house, sweating and feeling like her heart was about to explode because it was pounding so hard. How did anybody know about any of this, and why were they writing it down in a book? Was it Aunt Ruby?

Raven gasped out loud when her mom called from upstairs.

"We're leaving in ten minutes."

Raven felt sweet relief. She had to get out of this house. She turned to the last entry.

January 22: *Raven's mom tells her that they'll be leaving Aunt Ruby's house in ten minutes.*

"How did that happen?" she said, her eyes darting around the room. She looked down again at the last page. But now new words had appeared. Her blood turned into a raging river of ice-cold terror and she started shivering.

January 22: *It's coming for her.*

"Ahhhhhhh!" Raven screamed in her mind.

She tried to get up and run for the door but her legs were petrified. Fear gripped her completely. She thought she now heard strange breathing fill the room. But all Raven could do was sit in the chair and look down in horror at the final entry as an ominous shadow crept across the book.

January 22: *They will never hear her screams.*

And they didn't.

[Now pause as if the story's over. Then let out a very unexpected SCREAM!]

Some sort of Southern accent will do here.

Buried Treasure

The South Will Rise Again Cemetery didn't pay Joe much for doing its dirty work. So Joe supplemented his income in the usual way.

It was nasty work digging those holes and filling them again. Joe told himself it wasn't really stealing because those people didn't need their rings, bracelets, necklaces, and watches anymore. They especially didn't need the watches.

"Time's up, suckas," he would whisper to the corpses as he helped himself to their belongings.

On this particular late afternoon, Joe—like the sky above—was in a black and dirty mood because "*maybees* you can't judge no book by 'is cover but you can sure as donkey doo judge a dead man's coin by his box."

In other words, Joe knew that the probability of finding something of value under one of these inexpensive pine lids was about the same as his chances of winning the lottery. Still, he looked. And to his amazement, the peaceful-looking old man inside the plain, pine coffin had a thick and shiny gold ring on the wrinkled and bony pinky of his right hand.

"Now, grandpa, what you gonna need this here ring fur?" Joe wheezed as he balanced himself on his knees above the old man's open casket.

Joe gave the ring a good tug but nothing happened. So he pulled harder. Again, nothing. The third time he yanked so hard that he lost his balance and fell on top of the old man. Joe's hot, sweaty face squished up against the corpse's cold, dead cheek.

"Get away!" Joe shouted, eyes a bulgin', pushing himself up quickly. "Now you gone and made me mad. Playtime's ovah!"

Joe held onto the ring with both hands, pressed a boot down on the old man's wrist, and pulled so hard he accidentally let out some gas. The ring came off.

But so did the old man's finger!

It flew through the air, end over end, landing among the tombstones.

Joe pocketed the ring and closed the lid—not noticing or caring that the old man had lost his peaceful expression. It had begun to rain and the wind blew through the decaying autumn leaves, sending a chill through Joe's moist and smelly T-shirt. Joe spent all of two seconds looking for the finger but couldn't find it in the dying afternoon light.

"Looky like Rat Christmas come early this year," he said.

He moved the mound of dirt into the hole till there was a hole no more. Then he put on his jacket and started for home. The chubby raindrops got chubbier and the wind blew harder. Joe walked faster and pulled his collar tighter.

By the time he reached his dark and dusty house, Joe was cold through and through. He took a long shower and let the hot water bring back the feeling in his bones. Then he opened a big can of gumbo and ate it steaming right out of the pot. He turned on the college football game on his big screen.

An entire pecan pie helped Joe forget about the storm, still raging outside. He had almost forgotten about the ring too.

"Thet's right," he slurred with gumbo and pie crumbs stuck to his chin. "Thet's right."

Then the doorbell rang.

"Who be out there on a night like this?" Joe said. "Take your dumb self far away from here."

The doorbell rang again. And again. Finally Joe got up, scratched his bulging belly, and cursed all the way to the door. There was no one there. The wild wind blew the roly-poly raindrops into Joe's face, reminding him why he didn't want to open the door in the first place.

Joe closed the door and went back to the game. But the storm had knocked out the power. Joe was too tired to care. He stumbled down the hall and got into bed.

Outside the rain and wind were now joined by thunder and lightning. And somewhere beyond the storm, a voice began calling. It was an old voice. And it was angry.

"Give me my finger. Give me my fin-geeeeeeer," it moaned.

Inside, Joe was too tired to hear. At first.

"I said I want my fin-geeeeeeer," it wailed, louder now.

"Yeah, yeah, yeah," Joe said. “I thought I told you to take your dumb self far away from here.”

The wind blew harder than ever and the now big, ol’, fat-as-beignet raindrops beat on Joe's door like one of those dead classic rock drummers and the old man's voice wailed, "Now you made ME mad!"

And Joe's eyes got as big as alligator eggs and he shivered, "Somebody save me."

Then the storm suddenly stopped. Just stopped like someone had flipped a switch or something. It was now as quiet as the grave—something Joe knew about. But a few minutes later, the voice was back and meaner than a sunburned water moccasin and so close Joe could smell the old man's putrid crawfish breath.

"I said I want my FINGER!" it hissed and Joe, who already had the covers pulled over his head, was so scared out of his dim wits that he fainted right then and there in bed before he could call out, “Somebody save me.”

The next morning Joe woke up with his finger in his nose. He didn't remember putting it there. But that wasn't all that unusual. (When you're in the buried treasure business, it's hard to turn it off sometimes.) He had a pain behind the eyes but was glad the nightmare had been just that: a nightmare.

Joe picked his nose for a good long while, squinting up at the ceiling, and finally pulled his hand away from his face.

Horror-struck, he realized that both his hands were already down on the bed. Then he looked at his favorite nose-picking hand. There was only a white, bloody stump where his pinky should have been.

With his severed finger still wiggling around in his nose, Joe ran screaming out into the street in just his underwear.

In a stuffy-nose voice he just kept shouting, “Somebody save me! Somebody save me! Somebody save me!”

The Man in the Box

The last thing I remember is being out in a field with the wind and sun hitting my face. And then nothing. No memory, only darkness.

I don't know how long I've been in this box. It is as dark as the grave in here and impossible to breathe.

At least I am not alone. My eyes are useless but I can feel others in here and smell their sick, sweet, banana-maple fear. In the blackness I hear their voices.

One of them keeps saying how you don't want to leave this box. He must be crazy. I dream about it every night: getting out, getting out, getting out.

"Escape is death and death is escape," he repeats, making no sense that I can see. Of course, I cannot see anything.

He whispers that he has heard the cries of the victims when the end comes.

"The sound of thick water, gasping, and screams," the voice screeches. "The killer uses a giant shovel and then the lights go out... *forever*."

"I don't want to die! I don't want to die!" I hear the screaming coming from inside my head.

Suddenly everything starts to shake and at first I'm afraid that it's an earthquake and then, yes, it has to be an earthquake and maybe, just maybe, if it's a big one and I survive, maybe some way, somehow I'll be thrown clear and... escape!

And then I see the light. The light! The wonderful, glorious light! And I am filled with fear and joy and joy and joy and shaking and then I hear the thunder speak.

"BREAKFAST, MIKEY. I GOT YOU YOUR FAVORITE CEREAL!!!"

Eyes drowning in white light, lungs in white water, my scream is lost among so many. I see the shovel now coming toward me and close my eyes. And close my eyes...

Whenever I read this story in front of an audience, I have people tell me I sound like George López. That might be something to shoot for when you're reading it. Or not.

The Clown from Down Under

Elmer Rodríguez was one hard, little hombre. He never smiled. Never laughed. Always looking like his dog had just died—and so what if it had, what business was it of yours? I mean little dude was harder than getting up early on Sunday morning.

Elmer wasn't afraid of the teacher or the principal or those crazy *cholos* with the prison tattoos he had to pass every day on his way home. He wasn't even scared of getting beat up by the sixth graders.

There was only one thing the little eight-year-old was afraid of. And that thing came around once a year, every year.

For some reason, Elmer Rodríguez was scared lily white of clowns.

Sure, a lot of kids are scared of clowns. Nothing special in that. But Elmer was different. Clowns swallowed all the oxygen in a room and drained his heart of all its blood. He was so terrified that his family had to stay away from the most popular fast-food joints because of the clowns.

In kindergarten he had even fainted when a clown came out to the school during the yearly fire safety assembly. All the clown had done was smile.

But that's all it took: one look at that ear-to-ear, painted-on smile left Elmer's lungs sucking for air and the room spinning.

It was the same time the following year—although Elmer hadn't learned how calendars worked yet—when the clown reappeared. The little boy took deep breaths. One after another.

The children laughed nervously and the teachers laughed through their bottom teeth the way adults do when something's not really *chistoso*. The laughter echoed through the school as the clown's smile cut into Elmer's soul like a rusty razor.

"*El payaso, no.* Not the clown," Elmer whispered over and over again, squeezing his eyes so tight that fat tears spilled down his bloodless cheeks. *"El payaso, no."*

Speaking of fat, that clown was one *nacho grande*. And he wasn't even a real clown. He was just a fireman dressed up as a clown. Not that anyone would feel safe in case of a fire with this lard-haulin' *panzón* around. Except for the donuts, maybe.

At the next assembly, when he was in the second grade, Elmer could have sworn that the clown looked right at him and mouthed, *"Hola, amigo."* Elmer could see the clown's crooked yellow teeth smiling at him as its eyes danced like skeletons on *El dia de los muertos*. Those eyes were alive with evil and looking right at Elmer, burning a hole inside him that would always smolder.

As the years went by, Elmer wondered why the fire department would use a clown. What did clowns have to do with safety or fires or anything anyway? What did clowns have to do with anything except fear and evil and scaring poor little kids out of their minds?

When he was in the third grade, Elmer finally made up his mind that he would put an end to it. He stopped at a church before school to ask for help and forgiveness for what he was about to do.

As he got to school, Elmer saw the big red fire truck parked outside, and he knew that this was the day. His calendar skills had improved. When the clown started talking during the assembly, Elmer looked down and played nervously with his backpack.

Suddenly Elmer stood up and shouted "*No más, payaso*! No more!"

He then pulled something out of the backpack. Holding his breath, Elmer hurled a holy water-filled balloon at the clown and scored a direct hit on the thing's face. Splash!

The principal looked at Elmer's teacher like someone had cut a real nasty one and the teacher reached over and grabbed Elmer hard by the wrist.

"What in…!" the teacher yelled but then stopped when she heard a loud gasp coming from the crowd.

In front of that entire gym full of kids, the clown burst into flames. The other firefighters emptied their extinguishers, but the flames just kept growing until the smell of burning clown filled the air. The make-up, the

red plastic hair and red rubber nose, the big floppy shoes, the sweaty, smelly costume, and the thing's flesh all started to blur together.

The clown laughed at first but seemed to lose its sense of humor after the smile melted off its face.

"*Orale, pues.* All righty then. I'll be waiting for you down there, my little *vato*," it said in a low, threatening voice. "*Te espero, Elmer, eh?* I'll be waiting..."

And then it was gone. A smoking, black stain on the gym floor was all that remained.

No one—including Elmer—was sure what had happened. The only thing Elmer knew was that he never wanted to see that clown again. He promised himself that from then on he would be good. Very, very good. *Muy, muy bueno.*

The Delicious Death of Jay Whitebread

Jay Whitebread was a writer of children's books. His specialty was scary stories. He was very popular with parents and teachers and that whole army of kids who said they liked scary stories just as long as they weren't *too* scary.

Jay Whitebread was their man.

He wrote them long and boring. It was like he had designed an amusement park full of roller coasters that just sat there. No one had nightmares and everyone went along for the ride.

On this one not-too-spooky night, Jay Whitebread was rewriting an old story about a woman who always wore a velvet ribbon around her neck. She never took it off. One night while the woman slept, her husband—who just couldn't stand it any longer—removed the ribbon. The story was supposed to end with the woman's head coming off and rolling onto the floor.

But Jay Whitebread thought that was much too violent. What would teachers say? What would parents do when their children woke up crying in the middle of the night? No, no, no. The head coming off just wouldn't do. So he changed the ending.

Jay Whitebread kept the woman's head attached. When the husband took off the velvet ribbon, all that happened was the wife waking up and saying, "Boo."

No nightmares there. A few more stories like that and Jay Whitebread would soon have another soft batch ready to send off to his publisher.

Inside his big mansion on the hill, Jay Whitebread rewarded himself with a little cup of vanilla ice cream and sat in his big leather chair in front of one of his five fireplaces, looking very pleased with himself.

Suddenly there was crazy laughter coming from the chimney and a pound-pound-pounding as if something was making its way down toward the fireplace. Standing now, Jay Whitebread dropped his little cup of vanilla ice cream when he saw what it was.

Out of the fireplace and onto the floor rolled the head of the woman from Jay Whitebread's story.

"You don't scare nobody, Mr. Writer!" it cackled, rising off the ground. "Maybe you should write romance novels!"

The head floated closer and closer to Jay Whitebread's terrified face. From just a few inches away, it looked into his eyes and whispered, "Hey, you're kinda cute."

The head then closed its eyes, opened its mouth, and kissed Jay Whitebread on the lips.

Jay Whitebread turned as white as his vanilla ice cream and dropped dead. From outside the mansion, hideous cackling—and typing—could be heard long into the night.

Ghost Dogs

"On nights like these the dogs come out and take their revenge," Larry told the other two boys as they sat around the campfire. "That's what some of the old Indians say, anyway."

The three friends were squeezing in one more backpacking trip before going back to school. A freezing wind blew in off the river, blowing smoke and embers everywhere. The full moon disappeared behind some clouds.

Larry, who was a little older, had just finished telling the yawning Dixon brothers about how the men of the Lewis and Clark expedition barely survived their trip through the Bitterroot Mountains of Idaho. Half-frozen and half-starving, the Corps of Discovery stumbled into a Nez Perce village just in time.

The Indians shared their salmon and roots with the travelers. But after stuffing themselves, the explorers got picky.

As they made their way down the Columbia River, Lewis and Clark would stop at every village along the way and trade the Native Americans for their dogs. All the Indians could do was shake their heads at these very strange strangers.

"Surrounded by all that delicious, pink salmon flesh and these guys ate dogs," Larry said. "You can understand why the ghosts of Spot, Fido, and Lassie might be a wee bit upset."

The brothers weren't sure if they should believe Larry, even though he was the history nerd of the group.

"Nah-uh," Simon was about to say when something wet and cold licked his nose. It had started to snow. Big, heavy flakes fell from the September night, a little early for snow but the mountains are like that.

"'Night, losers," Larry called to the brothers as they went in their tent.

A few minutes later Simon was sleeping like a smelly baby, and in the other tent Larry was snoring up a storm of his own. Meanwhile, Danny shivered inside his cheap sleeping bag and wondered if he'd ever be able to get warm.

Sometime during the night—he couldn't tell how much time had gone by or if he'd slept at all—Danny heard what sounded like dogs howling. Or was it the wind and his tired mind playing tricks on him?

But a few minutes later, there it was again, louder and closer. He heard the howling just as clearly as he heard Larry snoring a few feet away. The dogs—or whatever it was—made a sad, mournful sound.

Through it all, Simon kept sleeping and Danny was once again amazed at how his brother could snooze through anything. The snow kept falling, sticking to the tent until it got too heavy and then rolling off in clumps. Danny poked his head out but didn't see anything except for all that snow.

At some point, Danny passed out and finally slept. He could still hear the dogs in his dreams.

The next morning a half foot of soft snow covered everything. Danny got up first and then Simon. Larry had finally stopped snoring.

"That was some dumb, boring story Larry was trying to sell us last night, huh?" Simon said, stretching.

The brothers had breakfast and packed up their gear. But Larry still hadn't gotten up.

"Hey, Sleeping Beauty, time to get a move on," Simon said finally. Danny threw a snowball at Larry's tent. And then he noticed that the snow around the bottom of the tent wasn't white. It was dark. Red even.

Worried now, Danny stuck his head inside the tent. Larry looked like he had been ripped apart by wolves. Or dogs. What was left of him looked like the pink salmon flesh he had talked about the night before. There was animal hair mixed in with everything too.

Danny screamed and then Simon looked in the tent and he screamed too. And then they screamed together. And then they screamed some more. It would take a lot more screaming before the brothers realized that there weren't any animal tracks anywhere near Larry's tent. All that soft, fresh snow and not one single paw print.

The boys just kept screaming.

[Now scream. Hopefully your listeners will join you. Just keep screaming together, or alone. Just keep screaming…]

***

Larry's account of the Lewis and Clark expedition is true. The explorers really did prefer to eat dog meat rather than fish, even though they were in the salmon capital of the world. They also preferred dog meat to horsemeat, which they were forced to eat sometimes.

By the way, cases of wolves attacking humans are quite rare. A healthy wild wolf has not killed anyone in the United States in the last 50 years. Dogs, on the other hand, killed 32 Americans in 2007 alone.

A Real Bad Burrito

Jim felt himself floating above the overturned car. Even as it still slid down the black icy road, he could somehow see the driver through the twisted metal and broken glass. At first Jim couldn't see the dead man's face. But then the corpse slowly turned its head, opened its eyes, and stared straight up at Jim. Through the fog in his mind, Jim recognized the face. It was his face.

"Aaaah!"

Jim woke up screaming, his pillow wet under his head. He inhaled deeply and let the fact sink in that it had only been a dream.

"Okay, no more midnight burritos for you, buddy," he told himself. But the nightmare had been too real to laugh away. As he stood at the top of the stairs, Jim made a decision. "Maybe it was a warning. Maybe the dream was trying to tell me I shouldn't drive into town today."

Jim didn't see his toddler's toy car on the second step. Suddenly he lost his balance and began tumbling down the stairs. He didn't stop till he reached the bottom. By then it was too late. Jim's neck was twisted in a way necks are not supposed to twist. His lifeless eyes stared out into space, seeing only emptiness.

Next to his body, the overturned toy car was still spinning.

Pumpkin Eye

By the time they made it out to the pumpkin patch, the sun was low in the sky.

"I can't wait to tell the kids at school about this," said María as she squeezed the large, yellow flashlight she had brought from her garage.

"Yeah, this will be cool," said Adriana. They both had backpacks filled with blankets, snacks, and cameras. It might be a long night and they were ready.

The pumpkin patch was out in the country, surrounded by cornfields and next to an old, rickety house that was barely standing. Few people came out here anymore—not since the slick, new pumpkin patch, complete with free hay rides and hot cider, opened on the other side of town.

But María and Adriana weren't there to buy a pumpkin. They were there to see the ghost of Robby Bligh, a teenager who had died in that very field over 20 years ago. According to the stories, Robby could be seen haunting the patch during autumn nights.

Nobody was around, except for the pumpkins. It was quiet and cold as the sun disappeared. The girls could see their foggy breaths hang in the air when they whispered to each other.

"Ready here," María said, pressing buttons on the video camera she had borrowed from her mom. "Now that Robby just needs to show and we'll be Internet stars, girl!"

Adriana laughed.

"Did you hear that?" Adriana whispered.

The distant sound of dry leaves crunching pierced the still night. As a matter of fact, María had heard it too and her arms turned all chicken skin.

"Someone's coming this way, but I don't see anyone," María said.

"Someone or *something*," said Adriana.

The sound grew louder as the two girls stared into the darkness, their hearts beating crazy hard. Something was walking right toward them. Suddenly they could see a tall, thin figure just a few feet away. Then, to their horror, it spoke.

"Ooohhhhhhhhhhh."

The voice sounded old and hollow and the girls screamed and took off running. The footsteps followed them, and the girls could swear they heard Robby Bligh at their heels, yelling out to them, angry and seeking revenge.

"Don't run! Don't ruuuuuun!"

But María and Adriana ran like a five-legged puma. They ran and ran until María let out a terrifying, horrible scream and disappeared from Adriana's side. Adriana stopped and turned around, desperately calling and looking for her friend, but couldn't find her. María had disappeared.

Adriana ran all the way home and told her parents what had happened. Later when the paramedics found María lying in the dirt, an old, thin man was with her.

"I live in the house over yonder and this here's my pumpkin patch," the old man explained to the paramedics as they were putting a bandage around María's bloody head.

"I tried to tell them youngsters not to run in the pumpkin patch, that it's dangerous, but they took off anyway."

He cleared the old-man phlegm from his throat.

"You know, that's how that fella Robby Bligh died out here some years back. He was running through the pumpkins and tripped and fell head first right into the biggest pumpkin we had ever grown. The stem went clear through his eye socket and into his brain, killing him on the spot.

"This gal here's just lucky. That little pumpkin just bloodied her up a bit. What you need two eyes for anyway?"

Room for Two More

Ted and Wendy passed through mile after mile of the most epic winter wonderland. The sky above was a brilliant blue, and the snow was not too soft and not too hard. Even Goldilocks would have said it was just right. The two snowshoers were heading toward a place on the map called *Satan's Lava Flow*.

"This is amazing but, dude, I'm so hungry I would sell my soul for a brownie," Ted said after a few hours.

Just then they saw smoke in the distance. A fire, they both thought. It would be sweet to warm themselves by a fire while they ate lunch. After a few more minutes, they came to a cabin-like shelter.

"According to the map, this isn't supposed to be here," Ted said.

"Well, I'm going in," Wendy said. "You can stay out here and eat your map."

It was dark and smoky inside. Old, rustic benches surrounded a black wood stove. When their eyes adjusted to the darkness, Wendy and Ted saw that they were not alone.

A man sat huddled in the darkest corner of the shelter. A tattered, red wool blanket pulled tightly around his head made it hard to see his face except for his hollow, tired eyes, which looked out in the distance.

Ted said hello but the man didn't answer. The man's presence seriously weirded them out, so they quickly chomped down their lunch and said good-bye. Once again the man didn't answer.

Then just as they were about to leave, he suddenly turned toward them and those dead eyes came to life with an evil, dark glow that illuminated the shelter and threw dark shadows into their souls. He seemed to speak to them without words, and the things he said filled Ted and Wendy with a cold that had nothing to do with the temperature.

They quickly put on their snowshoes and headed back into the woods. Ted turned around once and thought he saw the entire hut glowing with that horrible, dark light. Wendy could have sworn she heard terrible laughter coming from its direction. They quickly crunched through the woods in silence. Ted finally spoke.

"Man, that guy was creepy."

"No duh," Wendy said. "Did you see how he looked at us?"

The short winter day was getting shorter and a storm was moving in. Fortunately the snowshoers saw a sign that told them they were just two miles from their car.

"Almost there," Ted said.

"Almost there," Wendy said.

A dark wind began ripping through the trees, knocking down huge icicles from the branches. The sky was now the color of snow and their legs began to ache.

After an hour they came to another sign. Ted studied the sign through weary eyes and then studied it some more.

"According to this we're still two miles from the parking lot," Ted sighed. "I don't understand it."

He was sure they had made all the right turns at all the right places. A sick feeling gripped his bowels at the next intersection. There, another sign told them they were no closer to the car.

"Okay, someone's playing a joke," Wendy said. "Maybe somebody switched all the signs."

Snow began to fall sideways as Ted pulled the map and compass out of his pack.

"Forget those dumb signs," he said in a shaky voice. "If we start heading north, we're bound to reach the parking lot or at least the highway."

Horror-struck, he saw the compass needle spinning madly. Round and round it went. Ted yelled and threw the compass against a nearby tree. Then, too tired to hold the anger, he dropped to his knees.

Which way was north? Everything looked the same. No landmarks. Just trees in every direction. Wendy wondered how things had turned so bad so fast. The wind was blowing harder now, the snow sticking to the trees like the fear that began to coat their insides. And it was getting cold. Very cold.

"We've got to s-s-start moving," Ted said through chattering teeth. They patted each other on the shoulders the way football players do before a game.

"We can do this," Ted said.

"We can do this!" Wendy shouted back.

An hour later the sky had disappeared behind the screaming snow and it was getting harder and harder to see. Still, with legs of lead they plowed on.

"I'm tired," Wendy whispered a few minutes later. "So tired. Wait... Do you smell that?"

It was the strong smell of blackened wood, like a fire after the fire has gone out. Somehow the shelter must be close by, Ted thought. They could get warm and rest and get out of the storm. Through the driving snow, they could barely make out the outline of the wooden structure. The last of their energy gone, they smiled weakly at each other and shuffled toward it. Then they stopped dead in their tracks.

The man was still there. Ted saw those evil eyes, looking past the snow and the darkness, looking into him. And Wendy heard the laughter again. *That terrible laughter*.

They went inside.

[Laugh your most crazy-sounding laugh while making crazy eyes at your audience.]

Meat Me in the Cafeteria

It all started with burgers.

After years of the most gruesome, gut-wrenching grub known to child and man, the cafeteria at Mission Viejo Elementary, suddenly and most unexpectedly, one day began serving the best burgers in the world. Fresh, juicy, fat, charbroiled, teachers running in the hall with scissors, crazy good burgers!

There was no chance of a food fight breaking out on the days these babies were handed out.

But then a strange thing started happening. The kids at Mission Viejo Elementary began to get old. No, not older like an eight-year-old waking up on their birthday morning and being nine. The kids at Mission Viejo Elementary were getting real old, real fast.

Little first graders with white hair. Wrinkled up third graders with bad knees. Fifth graders with dentures.

And then it became known that the company selling the burgers to the school was getting its meat from something other than cows.

To save money the company had been stealing bodies from nursing homes and cemeteries and turning them into… burgers. Fresh, juicy, fat, charbroiled, teachers running in the hall with scissors, crazy good burgers!

After that, salads became much more popular at Mission Viejo Elementary.

Wind in your sails, a parrot on your shoulder… It's pirate time!

Ol' Fish Brains

Ahoy, maties. Gather round and see if ye can stomach this tale of the sea. If ye have the spine for it, aye. For this here be the tale of Ol' Fish Brains, it be. Yo, ho, ho and a bottle of clam juice.

Arr…

'Tis no great mystery why the men of the *Stella* called him Ol' Fish Brains neither.

"Save me the heads, Cookie," he would whisper to the cook with a black look in his one good eye. "The heads."

He would pop out the eyes of the raw fish heads with his rotting teeth and chomp on 'em like they be gum and then suck out the brains through the empty eye sockets.

And there he'd be all a slurpin' and a smilin' with fish blood and brain juice running down his beard. Arr. Sometimes pieces, sometimes whole eyeballs would drop down into that beard and the eyes would look out at you and you'd swear that they could see right through you and every sin that ever stained yer soul. Aye.

'Twas all he would eat. Real picky that way, he was.

Arr, sure enough that Ol' Fish Brains 'twas a crazy, old seabird. There be no question of that, maties. He blew his nose on his shirt and sometimes forgot to wear his eyepatch to cover the ugly hole where his eye used to be before he rubbed it out of his head after an extra crusty biscuit crumb got in there.

But he talked of the map and the buried treasure so often that some among the crew started to believe. Not that they would admit to it, aye, but in their lonely bunks with only the lice for company, they dreamed of those gold coins, those gold coins that increased in number every time the ol' crow told the tale.

One night, four weeks out at sea, it was, these two unsavory buckos break into the last rum barrel on board and start a drinkin' and a talkin'. A talkin' and a drinkin'. Talkin' about the treasure.

Arr.

"I know where he keeps that map," the one says to the other. "'Twould be an easy thing."

So they set a plannin' the deed for the next night when Ol' Fish Brains be asleep in his bunk. But the ol' bird wakes up and pulls a knife. A terrible ruckus ensues and the next thing anyone knows, Ol' Fish Brains has the blade stickin' out of his one good eye and right before he dies, he sits up and yells, "Save me the heads!"

Arr. Well, nobody saw who did it. Or else nobody was willin' to say. Anyways, everyone from the captain to the cook felt more at ease now that Ol' Fish Brains was gone.

Aye. A quick prayer, over the side of the ship, and gone to Davy Jones' locker was he. Glug, glug, glug. Gone. Arr.

It was a still, black night three weeks later. No stars nor moon cut through the drippin' fog. Not a drop of wind in all the sea and a quiet, an eerie quiet, hung over the port. Aye. A creepy feelin' come in from the water all dark and dead like.

And 'twas then that they saw her out in the water. The *Stella*, it had to be. No life blowin' in her ragged sails, just hanging there all akimbo. But somehow she was movin' closer and closer to shore.

And when she came closer still, they could see the crew standing on deck. The first mate grippin' the wheel. The captain next to him. Aye. Not a sound they made moving through the water on that terrible night.

And then as she came even closer, some among the crowd let out a gasp. Others a scream. Some made no sound, just fainted. Others still ran back to the town, to the hills. It didn't seem to matter where. Aye.

For the men of the *Stella* were all missing their heads, ya see. Every last one of 'em. Not a head among the whole lot, aye.

Dead men tell no tales, so the few landlubbers who still had their wits about them were left with many a question but few answers. How did the *Stella* make its way back to port with a dead crew? How could the ship move with no wind in her sails? And what happened to the men and their heads?

Well, they never found the heads of the sailors of the *Stella*. Arr. Some say the ghost of Ol' Fish Brains took 'em. But that can't be. After all, there be no such thing as ghosts.

Arr! Hahahahahahahahahahaaaaaa! Arr!

Wack-O

The strange man with the deranged look in his eyes hid behind a tree. Running down the wooded river trail, Ed never knew what hit him. In a crazed split second, the man swung at Ed like Big Papi going for the fences. Wack-O! The huge branch exploded into the back of Ed's head and everything went black.

He was in a coma for three weeks and very nearly died. They never caught the man behind the tree.

After a long, painful recovery, Ed's life went back to normal. He even began running again.

One beautiful Sunday morning, Ed decided to go back to his favorite trail, the one where it had happened. At first Ed was troubled by the memory of that day and his heart raced ahead of his running shoes. But after a few minutes, the sights and sounds of spring filled his senses with the present. It was a new day. And it was great to be alive.

Ed ran hard and fast and felt the power returning to his body like an extinct volcano finding its magma again. Then he noticed the laces on his left shoe had come undone. He stopped behind a tree and... something happened. His eyes rolled back in his head, the color left his face, and the edges of his mouth turned up slightly into a threatening, sick smile.

Behind the tree, Ed waited patiently—with a heavy branch in his hand—for the next runner to pass.

Problem Number 13

Most of the babysitters in town wouldn't go near the house on Carney Hill. But Eliza was new in Big Top, so she hadn't heard the stories. All she knew was that Mr. and Mrs. Kerr needed a babysitter, and she needed the money.

The Kerrs and their three children seemed friendly enough. So what if the house was decorated with dozens of clown paintings? Eliza wasn't afraid of clowns. She couldn't understand why so many kids were.

"Joe and I will be back around 10 o'clock," said Mrs. Kerr. "Make sure the kids get to bed by nine."

The well-behaved children drew pictures quietly, mostly of clowns, and then watched an old black-and-white TV show called *Circus Boy* until it was bedtime.

After the kids were all in their beds, the babysitter reluctantly began doing her math homework under a giant painting which hung over the fireplace.

A few minutes later, Eliza glanced up from her work and noticed that the sad clown in the painting seemed to be looking at her. Nonsense, she thought. It was just that she was sitting right in the clown's line of sight. Still, she took her books and went over to the other side of the room.

When Eliza finished her homework, she looked up again at the painting. No. It couldn't be. The clown was looking right at her!

Eliza shut her eyes so tightly they felt like they were going to pop out of her head. Then suddenly she heard the children screaming and she ran upstairs toward the bedrooms. Out of the corner of her eye, she could have sworn she saw that the clown was no longer in the painting.

At the top of the stairs, Eliza froze. There, standing right in front of her, was the clown from the painting.

"How's the math going?" he laughed. "I've been watching you all night."

His large, red shoes began moving towards her and then he whispered, "I think you got problem number 12 wrong."

The last thing to come from Eliza's lips was a bloodcurdling scream. Then the lights went out at the house on Carney Hill.

The children were not able to explain what had happened and the police never found Eliza.

In all the confusion, no one noticed that Eliza had missed just one math problem — the last one, problem 12. And somehow no one noticed that the sad clown in the giant painting over the fireplace was no longer sad. Finally, no one noticed that there was something reflected in the clown's eyes: It was a girl. And she was screaming.

[Now scream.]

I Doooooooooooo...

Dan's knees shook like leaves on a windy day.

"Focus, Dan, focus," he told himself.

Dan had never gotten over his fear of heights. He had just learned to control it by paying attention to the small details of his job. For the last several years, Dan had been a window washer, hanging off the side of some of the tallest buildings in town.

"Wet it down," Dan reminded himself. "Now use the squeegee."

But Dan's knees weren't shaking on this day because he was hundreds of feet off the ground. He was shaking because he was excited. Linda worked on the top floor of this building. And tonight after work, he was going to ask Linda to marry him.

As Dan was working on the floor below Linda's office, he reached into his pocket to look at the ring he had bought her.

"I hope she says *yes*," he said out loud.

Suddenly the ring slipped out of Dan's sweaty hand. It bounced off the scaffold he was standing on and landed on the ledge of the building. He tried to reach it but his safety harness didn't let him. There was only one thing to do. Dan removed the harness and stretched for the ring.

Just as he grabbed it, a powerful gust of wind hit. The scaffold swayed violently. Dan lost his balance and fell over the side.

Dan found himself hanging from the bottom of the platform by the fingers of his left hand. His feet danced below him high above the busy street. Somehow, he was still squeezing his right fist around the ring.

With his heart screaming in his ears, Dan quickly put the ring in his pocket and grabbed hold with both hands. Using all his strength, he pulled himself back onto the scaffold and into his harness.

"That was close," Dan said, trying to catch his breath. "But it's all good now."

A few minutes later, Dan happily pounded on the window glass to get Linda's attention. She didn't hear him, so he pounded harder. Again she didn't hear. He started hitting the window so hard he thought the glass would break.

Finally, Linda looked up from her work and came toward the window where Dan was waving now. A look of horror filled her face. She turned pale and crashed to the floor.

"Linda!" Dan screamed. "Lindaaaaaaaaaa!"

Linda's best friend Barbara, who had heard the noise from next door, helped Linda up to a nearby chair.

"It was Dan, wasn't it?" Barbara asked.

"Yes," Linda said through her sobbing. "He came back just like he always does each year on this day. The day 13 years ago when he fell to his death."

Hot Heads of Jalapeño Canyon

"It get hot up there," the old man had warned them at the gas station. "I would not go there today if I was *chu*."

The four college buddies had rolled their eyes at each other and made the international sign for *loco de la cabeza*. When they got to the trailhead, the hikers loaded their packs and quickly put five miles behind them. The top of Mt. Gato Anaranjado was now just two miles away.

"Piece of cake," one of them said. "*Chu* would have to agree."

They all laughed. And their laughter echoed up and back down the canyon.

Back at the gas station, the old man was laughing too. He was laughing because he knew things. He knew, for example, that…

[Now start laughing and don't stop until your listeners start laughing too. Then stop laughing and pretend the story is over. When your friends ask questions or complain that the story wasn't scary, grab one of them and scream like you're insane.]

***

Sometimes the scariest thing about a story is the person who is telling it. Another way to tell this rather silly tale is to read it twice. Then just wait. When someone says something—and they always do—just start repeating whatever they say. Do this for a while, and when the person starts getting tired or annoyed, just SCREAM!

Don't Forget to Flush

Jesse Jones hated that *stooopid* little doll as much as he hated his *stooopid* little sister.

She was always getting him in trouble. (Although if truth be known, Jesse Jones did a fine job of that all by his lonesome.) She would pull that *stooopid* string nonstop and that *stooopid* little doll said those *stooopid* things nonstop.

"That outfit looks glorious on you."

"It's a beautiful day to play with your dollie."

"Shall we have some more tea?"

Stooopid, *stooopid*, *stooopid* things like that.

So one day when Jesse Jones just couldn't stand it any longer, he took matters into his own hands. His mom had taken Cathy to the mall and left him behind, even though he wanted to go check out the games at the used video game store.

"You're just going to have to learn to be nicer to your sister, Mr. Mean Brother Man," she had said before they walked out.

Jesse Jones hadn't planned on it. He was just walking around the house bored and mad. Then he saw it.

He was more than a little surprised that his sister had forgotten to take it with her. Jesse Jones started by throwing the doll on the floor and stomping on it. And kicking it. Then throwing it against the wall. Over and over again.

"What do you say to that?!" he yelled. "It's a beautiful day to knock the stuffing out of your dumb dollie. Ha, ha, ha!"

He was really having fun now and starting to feel better. Then it happened. Later Jesse Jones didn't really remember exactly how it happened. But the doll's head came off. At first he tried to put it back on, but that didn't work. After that he walked around the house, throwing the head in the air and catching it like a baseball. Eventually, he reached the bathroom.

Later Jesse Jones didn't really remember how the next thing happened either. But somehow or other the doll's head wound up in the toilet. As he was staring at the disembodied head just floating there, he heard the front door open.

"Jesse, we're home!"

Jesse Jones thought something like "oh, shoot" and acted quickly. There was only one thing to do.

Even before leaving the bathroom, he heard his sister's screams ripping the house apart.

"NooooOOOO!!!" she wailed. "My dollie!"

Jesse Jones was born for moments like these. He had to think fast. So he fed his mom some line about Buster being a likely suspect. And to his astonishment, his mom bought it.

"I can't believe Buster would do such a thing," his mom said, but there was something in the way she said it that made Jesse Jones feel like she could believe.

His only defense a sad, confused look, Buster did indeed end up taking the fall. He was sentenced to solitary confinement in the backyard.

"That, my friend, was a close one," Jesse Jones whispered to himself. "At least that *stooopid* dog is good for something."

When he saw his little sister later that day, her eyes were red and swollen. She was quiet. His teacher would have said she was heartbroken or something sappy like that.

"Serves her right," Jesse Jones thought. It had turned out to be quite an adventure but he had come out all right. More than all right.

Outside, the moon played hide-and-seek behind the oak tree and Buster whined sadly. When his mom said it was bedtime, Jesse Jones didn't argue. He was pooped. Plum tuckered out. He brushed his teeth and went to bed. Then he heard it. Moaning, soft and low.

"Why did you do that to me, Jesse? Why?"

The sound was coming from the toilet. It couldn't be coming from the toilet. But it came from the toilet. It came just the same.

“Why, Jesse? Jesse, Why? Whyyyyyy did you tear my head OFF?”

Being Jesse Jones, Jesse Jones got mad. Real mad. And then he got even. He went to the bathroom, flushed the toilet, and smiled. Then he went back to bed. He had no trouble falling asleep. But something woke him in the middle of the night. The voice of the doll was back. It was louder.

“Whyyyyyy, Jesse? WHY?!”

Jesse Jones began to worry that someone might hear, but he was beginning to get scared too. Too scared to go to the bathroom and look to see that there was nothing there. Nothing in the toilet. But what if there were? Better stay in bed, Jesse Jones counseled himself.

“Jesse, what you did to me wasn’t RIGHT!” The voice was closer now, and louder and angrier. “And what about poor Cath-EEEEEE?!”

Jesse Jones pulled the covers over his head and for the first time in his life felt real fear. The doll’s voice was closer still — it sounded like it was right above his head — and it didn’t sound like the doll’s voice anymore. It sounded wet and dark and not of this world.

“I-I-I’m sorry,” Jesse Jones stuttered and cried.

“It’s much too late for that,” the voice said. “Now you’re coming with MEEEEEEEEE!”

The next morning Jesse Jones didn’t come down for breakfast. His mother called and called and finally had to go into his room. When she opened the door, the smell almost made her vomit. It was as if the most terrible toilet in the world had backed up and overflowed into the room.

Jesse Jones was never seen again.

They're Coming For You 2
More Scary Stories that Scream to be Read

by

O. Penn-Coughin

Copyright © 2010 O. Penn-Coughin
Text and Illustrations Copyright © 2010 O. Penn-Coughin

You Come Too Publishing

They're Coming For You 2
More Scary Stories that Scream to be Read
You Come Too
Publishing
O. Penn-Coughin

Introduction

There are two types of people: scary story people and the other kind. I'm glad you are the first kind. But if you're not, it's not too late. There's still time to join us—or to put down this book.

Scary story people are usually also roller coaster people. If you love one, you almost have to love the other. (I'm an exception to this rule. I love scary stories but am terrified even of Ferris wheels. *Especially* of Ferris wheels. Go figure.) Reading or listening to a scary story is very much like taking a roller coaster ride in the safety of your own mind. Sometimes both can make you shut your eyes, laugh, scream, or even throw up. By the way, throwing up in your own mind is not as bad as it sounds. Your stomach doesn't hold grudges and the clean up's a breeze.

These stories are meant to be enjoyed out loud or alone if—as they say—you dare. Either way, the whole point is to have fun. I had a lot fun writing this book. I hope you have fun reading it.

So strap in, hold on tight, and enjoy the ride!

O. Penn-Coughin

Death of a Ghost Hunter

Tonight on *Ghost Stalkers* we investigate the chilling case of Moore Elementary School, which is said to be haunted," Matt Matherson said looking into the lens. "The school has been closed for more than 50 years, but the stories—and the ghosts—refuse to die."

The green glow of the night vision camera cast an eerie light over everything and whited out Matt's eyes.

"It all happened here, back in the last century," Esther Wilmington said, walking down the hall. "Over the years, eight children died in Room 6 under mysterious circumstances. According to rumors—never proved—those kids literally died of boredom. These rumors—again, never proved—claim that the teacher put her students to sleep with her lessons. And that, sadly, some never woke up."

"Later, the authorities found that the true cause of the deaths was a gas leak," Jerry Harrison said. "According to survivors, old Mrs. Bonyhady's part in it was that she always had the heat turned way up and kept the windows tightly shut."

"As a precaution, we are all equipped with our own gas detectors and emergency oxygen tanks tonight," Matt said. "So I hope you can keep that bean burrito you had for dinner to yourself, Jerry."

They all laughed and walked into Room 6.

"There are some old timers who refuse to believe the science, though," Esther said. "They still maintain that it was Mrs. Bonyhady's boring lessons that killed those kids."

"Aaaaaaaaaah," the cameraman yawned suddenly, trying to sound like a dead child. "I'm soooooooo sleeeeeeepy."

It was what the director called a "fakeout." During the entire history of the show they had never come across any real ghosts, so the cast and crew would make things up from time to time to keep the viewers interested.

"What the blank was that?" Jerry said into the camera, his eyes growing large. "I have a blank feeling about this blank."

(The bleeps would be added later. Everyone agreed that the fake swearing made the show seem more real.)

"I don't know!" Esther shouted.

They became quiet and looked around, waiting.

Nothing happened.

"Gas readings appear normal," Jerry said.

The camera showed the empty desks and some overturned chairs. An ancient green chalkboard covered one entire wall. Broken glass littered the floor by the narrow, tall windows.

"What a terrible place to die," Esther said, shaking her head.

"Let's get out of here," Jerry said.

"You two keep exploring the first floor," Matt said as they stepped back out into the hall. "I'll take a look down in the basement."

In reality, Matt was headed up to the second floor, where he was supposed to put on a ghost costume and pop out of the girls' bathroom.

"Will do," Jerry said.

The camera followed Jerry and Esther as they walked down the long, dark corridor. Suddenly, a shadow crossed in front of them and disappeared into one of the rooms.

A rush of fear and excitement passed through Esther.

"Let's follow it," she said.

"Huh?" Jerry said. "Oh, right."

Inside the dark room, their headlamps illuminated the desks and chairs.

"Nothing out of the ordinary here," Jerry said.

Then they heard the sobbing. Esther pointed a shaky finger at the corner where a little girl sat with her back to them. She was holding her head in her hands.

"Help, help, help," she whispered. "Help him."

Horror-struck, the two ghost hunters said nothing.

“Class has started,” the girl said, fading as she turned toward them. “And he won’t be able to stay awake for long.”

She then disappeared down into the floor. Jerry and Esther ran out to the hall.

“None of that was in the script, man!” Jerry said nervously. “I’m getting out of here.”

“Not without Matt,” Esther said.

They hurried up the stairs to the girls’ bathroom. The cameraman followed.

Back in Room 6, Matt sat down at one of the desks. There was a dusty, old book in front of him.

“Hey, I don’t remember this being here before,” he said yawning.

“Class, we have a new student joining us today,” an old voice said. “Please turn to page 247.”

Even though the windows were broken, it was suddenly very warm in the room. The gas detector was still normal. Several ghost children now sat at the other desks, their heads down. Matt could hear some of them snoring, but he was strangely untroubled. His eyelids grew heavy.

“George Washington was the father of our country. He chopped down that cherry tree, children, and could not tell a lie…”

“Stay awake, Matt!” Esther shouted somewhere upstairs. “Whatever you do, do not fall asleep!”

“Shhh, keep it down,” Matt slurred as he slumped down in his little chair. “Some of us are trying to *zzztudeee*…”

“Find the verb in this sentence. Spell the word *misspell*,” the teacher continued. “Forty-eight divided by six equals…”

By the time they found him, it was too late. Matt was face down in a pool of his own drool.

“Good,” Mrs. Bonyhady said, blocking the door. “More new students.”

Missing Cat

"Five. Hundred. Dollars." Morgan kept repeating each word slowly. "Five. Hundred. Dollars."

He stood in front of the telephone pole staring at a flyer. The photo showed a longhaired white cat being held by an old woman with thick glasses. The generous reward was being offered for *Mister Framboise*.

"That's such a lame name for a cat," Morgan said to the poster. "Well, Mister Framboise, I'm gonna find you anyway."

Morgan saw a lot of cats that week, but not the one he was looking for.

He felt the $500 slipping away. Then he got an idea. He would paint one of those other cats to look like Mister Framboise.

"That stupid, old woman is probably half-blind," Morgan muttered. "She won't be able to tell the difference."

It didn't take Morgan long to find a longhaired black cat that looked to be the right size. Then he bought some hair dye at the drug store.

"Just hold still, Mister Framboise," Morgan shouted.

After some awful meowing, hissing, and scratching, Morgan had his white cat. It wasn't perfect—a few black spots still showed here and there—but it was good enough to get the job done.

Morgan called the number on the flyer.

"I think I found your cat," he said into the phone.

"Oh, that's wonderful," the old voice said. "Can you bring him over after the sun goes down?"

"Sure," Morgan said. "No problem."

After dinner, Morgan put the white cat in a cardboard box and walked over to the house. He rang the doorbell. The old woman from the picture opened the door.

"Here's your cat," Morgan said.

"Oh, my," the woman said, opening the box. "Mister Framboise, there you are. I was beginning to think I would never see you again. Please come in, young man."

The cat jumped out of the box and ran down the sidewalk.

It was dark in the living room, the only light coming from a few candles. Dust and cobwebs covered everything. The old woman brought Morgan some cookies and milk.

These are actually pretty good, Morgan thought, finishing the last one. *But this milk tastes nasty*.

"That's because I put a little something in it to help you relax," the old woman said without moving her lips. "And to help get the blood flowing."

"What? Hey, how did you know what I was thinking?" Morgan slurred, the room starting to spin. "Where's my money anyway? I brought, I brought, I brought back your cat."

"Oh, that's not my cat," the woman said.

"How could you tell?" he asked, his tongue growing too thick to speak. "You only *thaw, thaw, thaw* him for a *th-th-th*-second."

"I don't have a cat," she said.

Morgan tried to get up from the chair, but his legs didn't work. He tried to scream. But he was powerless.

The old woman came toward him. He could smell the death on her as she leaned in close. She then opened her mouth and her dentures dropped down into Morgan's lap. He saw the sharp fangs poke out from her pink-black gums. A second later they dug deep into his neck.

As the life drained out of him, the last thing Morgan saw was the old woman changing, becoming younger and more beautiful with every drop. *With every precious drop…*

El Chupacabras

Somewhere near the border between Arizona and Mexico, the three friends sat around the campfire. It had been a long day. In the distance a storm was gathering strength.

"My feet hurt," Duncan said.

"Tell me about it," Whitney said, throwing another branch on the fire.

"My shoulders are killing me," Jeremy said. "That backpack weighs a—"

There was a rustling in the nearby bushes.

"What was that?" Whitney said.

Suddenly a dog-like creature ran toward them. It stopped, gave a crazy-eyed stare, and howled. Then it jumped through the fire and back into the darkness.

"Man, that was nuts," Duncan said.

"I thought animals were supposed to be naturally afraid of fire," Jeremy said.

"Seemed like something spooked that coyote real bad," Whitney said. "Real bad."

A streak of lightning lit up the nearby saguaros. Thunder rumbled overhead. A cold wind began to blow. The storm was getting closer.

Just then an old man stumbled into camp. His hair was white and a tattered poncho covered his frail body. Thick wrinkles crisscrossed his leathery face. The old man's little eyes were filled with fear and he was out of breath. He sat down without waiting for an invitation.

"What are you doing out here?" Jeremy asked. "Are you lost?"

"El Chupacabras viene por mi, El Chupacabras viene por ti," the old man whispered, shivering.

"What's he talkin' about?" Whitney said.

"English, please," Duncan said.

Everyone was quiet for a while and then the old man spoke again.

"El Chupacabras viene por mi, El Chupacabras viene por ti."

"What's he sayin'?" Whitney asked in a high-pitched voice.

"You should have learnt you some Spanish," Jeremy said.

"You should have learnt *you* some Spanish," Whitney said.

The fire danced in the old man's beady eyes and rain began to fall. Thunder and lightning closed in all around. The wind spit sand into their faces.

"This is starting to creep me out," Duncan said, putting on his jacket.

The old man wrapped his poncho tighter around himself and just repeated, *"El Chupacabras viene por mi, El Chupacabras viene por ti."*

"I wish you would just shut up!" Whitney shouted. "You keep sayin' that and we done told you, we can't understand what it means."

The wind howled louder and the old man answered.

"El Chupacabras viene por mi, El Chupacabras viene por ti."

As lightning flashed overhead, the old man suddenly jumped up and threw off his poncho. He started shaking and circling the fire in a kind of insane dance. Slowly at first, and then faster and faster.

"Now what's he doing?" Whitney said, his eyes looking like the coyote's.

The old man kept dancing and shouting.

"¡El Chupacabras viene por mi! ¡El Chupacabras viene por ti!"

The last thing they saw was the old man lunge toward them with the speed of a wild animal.

The last thing they heard was the *thing*—no longer an old man—saying, *"El Chupacabras viene por mi, El Chupacabras viene por…**AAAH!**"*

***

*Before turning into a blood-thirsty beast, the old man kept repeating, "The goat sucker is coming for me, the goat sucker is coming for… **AAAH!***

Red Barn

There was something wrong with the red barn.

Mary had felt it the first day her family moved into the large house on 10 acres in the country. The barn was the first thing she saw as the moving truck pulled up, and she felt the wrongness of it deep down inside.

It was old and had been left out in the rain too long, mold covering as much of it as the fading, red paint. But it wasn't the exterior that troubled Mary. There was something in its bones that wasn't right, something that could not be explained away as just a bad case of the creeps.

Mary stayed as far away from it as possible.

And then came the winter.

Even in summer the house had been chilly for most of the day, but now it was downright cold around the clock. The old heating system couldn't keep up with the dropping temperature.

"We can't go on like this," Mary's mom said one night in December. "It's freezing in here."

When Mary got home from school the next day, she saw her father swinging an ax in front of a large pile of wood outside the red barn.

"I repaired that old wood stove today," he said as he brought the ax down. "Could use your help stacking this in the barn, Mare."

Mary felt her heart start playing hopscotch inside her chest at the thought of going into the old barn. But she reminded herself that her father was right there, a few feet away. What could happen?

She got some gloves from the house and began picking up pieces of splintered wood. She focused on the work and the sound of the ax outside, trying not to think about where she was.

"This isn't so bad," she told herself as she got into the rhythm of her task.

But every once in a while, it hit her. The dark evil of the place was there, all around her. Waiting. Waiting.

It was cold in the barn, cold enough that she could see her breath, but by the time she finished Mary was hot and sweaty.

She let out a long sigh.

"All done, Dad."

That night the house was nice and warm. Everyone was in a good mood.

Mary was filled with relief at having the wood stacking behind her. There'd be no reason now for her to have to go back inside the barn for a long time, and that made her happy.

But a few nights later, all that changed.

"My back's killing me, Mare," her dad said. "You think you could bring in some wood from the barn?"

Mary shuddered at the thought of going down to that sinister barn at this hour of the night. She slowly pulled on her boots and gloves.

It was cold and clear outside, but Mary didn't look up at the stars. She kept her head down, focusing on the small bit of ground illuminated by her flashlight. She could feel the barn out there, watching and waiting. Waiting for her.

It took all of Mary's courage to open the heavy, wooden door and step inside. It was even colder in the barn than it was outside. Mary's heart beat uncontrollably as she scanned the floor for the woodpile. When she found it, she put down the flashlight and quickly began picking up pieces.

Suddenly a loud creaking sound came from the wooden loft above her head. Something was up there. Mary wasn't going to stick around to find out what. Cradling a few pieces of wood to her chest, she ran out and up the dirt driveway back to the house.

Breathing hard, she put down the pile of wood near the stove.

"One more trip should do it," her dad said.

The words screamed inside Mary's mind.

ONE MORE TRIP!

"Can't this get us through the night?" she said, almost crying. "It's so creepy out there."

"Oh, Mary, there's nothing to worry about," her mom said. "The night's just playing tricks on you."

"Besides, it's good to face your fears," her dad said. "Get back out there, young lady, and face your fears."

A second later her parents were laughing at something on TV.

Mary went back out and then remembered she had forgotten the flashlight.

“That was stupid,” she said, mad at herself and her parents.

She could see the small light in the barn in the distance. She forced her legs to move quickly down the dark path.

“Face your fears,” Mary mouthed as she walked. “Face your fears.”

As she reached the barn, the light went out. Mary took a deep, shaky breath and went inside. She felt around on the ground for the flashlight. After several seconds that seemed like minutes, she found it and gave it a shake.

The light flickered back on. But Mary’s sigh of relief died in her throat as she looked down at the ground in front of her. Her mouth hung open and her eyes widened with terror.

The once neatly stacked woodpile was now scattered all over the floor. It took Mary a few moments to realize that the pieces were arranged in crude letters. Letters that spelled out…

Then the flashlight went out again and the door slammed shut.

“Have you come to face me, Mary?” a voice whispered in Mary’s ear. “Have you come to face your fears?”

It was the voice of the thing she had felt and dreaded all along. It was the voice of the evil that haunted the place. A pure evil that now reached out its fingers for her from the darkest depths of the barn.

Mary stumbled forward and somehow managed to open the door. She ran toward the house screaming.

Behind her the red barn shook with wicked, unspeakable laughter.

Mary ran screaming.

She couldn’t stop screaming.

Fool's Gold

It was too cold for September, Joseph thought, staring at the flames as they shot up into the black sky. He rubbed his hands together for warmth.

"All for nut'in'," Elroy muttered, spitting on the ground.

Joseph and Elroy had been searching for gold in the Klondike wilderness for the entire summer and the only things they had to show for it were callused hands and sore backs. With autumn closing in, they knew that they had better find their fortune soon or they would be heading back home to Seattle empty-handed.

"Take it easy," Joseph said. "We're not done yet."

"Not at all like they said," Elroy said. "Only ones making any money here are those mule packers and merchants selling us the equipment."

Joseph studied his grimy hands in the fire's glow.

"Gotta just keep working," Joseph said.

Suddenly, there was a loud rustling noise in the bushes behind them. Elroy stood quickly, stumbling a little as he reached for his rifle.

"Who's there?" Joseph yelled out into the darkness.

Both men breathed hard, staring at the brush. They had heard about men being attacked and killed by huge grizzly bears out here. The rustling got louder and then something walked toward them. But it wasn't a bear. It was a boy.

The men breathed a sigh of relief. Then Elroy got mad.

"Shouldn't sneak up on people like that, fool," he shouted. "Nearly got kilt."

He set his rifle down against a rock.

The boy was about 10, with dirty clothes. Joseph figured he must be a miner's son.

"What ya doing out here?" Joseph asked.

"My pa died a while back. I been living out here ever since."

"Out here all by yourself?" Elroy said.

He nodded.

"You hungry?" Joseph said, offering a biscuit.

But the boy refused the food. He sat down by the fire.

"Well, you ain't staying with us," Elroy said. "Can't be taking care of no stupid boy. We got work to do."

But Joseph didn't see it that way.

"You stay here with us tonight, help us mine in the morning and we'll bring you into town when we're through. Somebody there will help you out."

"Thank you, sir," the boy said.

"Your pa find any gold out here?" Elroy asked, eyes half moons.

"Yessir, lots. Big nuggets too," the boy said. "Pa was always lucky like that."

"Lucky 'til he wasn't, you mean." Elroy let out a long chuckle, and downed the rest of his drink. He stood up and stretched.

"This is what we're gonna do," Elroy finally said. "Tomorrow you gonna show us where your pa's claim is at. And if what you say is true, maybe we'll keep you on for a while. You know, take care of you some."

Joseph knew that Elroy was up to no good.

"Best get to bed now, son," Elroy said, handing him their extra blanket. "See you in the morning."

Joseph and Elroy secured the camp for the night in case of rain. The boy fell into a quick sleep next to the fire.

"Yeehaw," Elroy said in a low voice. Gold was dancing in his eyes. "Tomorrow the two of us gonna be rich!"

"Take it easy," Joseph said. "Let's just wait and see. And I think you mean the three of us."

"I mean what I said, two of us," Elroy said. "Don't be a fool. We ain't gonna keep this boy on. He's gonna show us where this gold mine is and soon after that it will be back to the two of us. You follow?"

Joseph stared at the sleeping boy. Never had he seen such a paler face. He crawled inside the tent, both excited and troubled about the coming day.

In the morning, the fog lingered, leaving the day cold and eerie. They gathered up their gear and followed the boy.

"Elroy, let's just take him back tonight," Joseph whispered. He had been thinking about it all night. "We'll take him into town and then his gold will be ours."

"No can do," Elroy said. A big sack of equipment hung over his shoulder. "He'll spill his guts like he done with us and a hundred miners will be here tomorrow."

They walked on. Joseph wasn't sure what to do. Maybe he should try to talk some sense into Elroy. Or at least warn the boy.

"Pa liked to dig up in those rocks over there," the boy yelled back to them, pointing to an outcrop.

Elroy smiled and rubbed the thick stubble on his chin.

"I'm gonna do this quick, partner. No sense in dragging it out."

Joseph was torn. He didn't want to see any harm come to the boy, but he really wanted that gold and didn't want to share it with anybody.

"In here," said the boy, disappearing into the mouth of a small opening. Elroy threw down his heavy load, held tight to his rifle, and motioned Joseph to stay back.

"I'll call out when it's all clear," he said, winking.

Joseph stood on the thin trail alone in the wet morning, waiting. He tried to feel excited about the gold, but he felt awful and guilty.

Suddenly loud, horrible noises came from the cave. Screams and howls and grunts and groans. Awful spine-tingling, blood-splattering sounds. Some crazed beast was ripping apart Elroy and the boy.

"ELROY!" Joseph screamed, running up to the dark entrance.

He stopped, frozen in fear. The noises were louder and even more horrible. He fired a shot into the air, but it didn't stop anything.

"Must have been a bear in there," Joseph whispered. His mouth was dry as bone dust and his heart thumped fast and hard in his chest. After a few seconds, he backed away. "Can't save nobody now."

Joseph started running down the trail. He was filled with fear, but it didn't stop his feet any. When he couldn't hear those awful sounds anymore, he stopped for a moment to catch his breath.

What if that man-killing bear follows me? Best to wait. I can get a good shot here.

He climbed up on a rock that overlooked the path and waited. It wasn't too long before he heard something coming.

"Dang, that was fast," he whispered, gripping his rifle.

Sweat poured from his face. Then he saw it.

It wasn't a bear. It was that pale, 10-year-old boy standing on the trail. Blood was dripping from his face. His shirt was ripped and stained. His eyes were huge and wild. He didn't look like any sort of boy anymore.

The thing stood there in silence, its long, red-colored teeth glistening through the fog as he sniffed the air.

And at the very exact moment that Joseph realized that the thing was looking for him, their eyes met. The rifle smashed to the ground as the boy raced toward Joseph. Soon, more of that terrible screaming could be heard for miles and miles.

And then it was quiet again.

Your Right

An old woman walked by the cemetery one night and noticed a zombie rising up from its grave.

She hurried home and locked the door. She warmed up some old vegetable soup and slurped it down. After dinner, she went upstairs and got into bed. She put on her reading glasses and opened a book.

The wind pushed past the branches and the leaves and rattled the windows. And somewhere out in the night, a voice called out.

"Where's my small intestiiiiine?" it murmured in the distance.

The old woman put down her book.

"Who's got my tonsiiiiils?" it said, sounding a little closer.

The old woman pulled the covers tightly around her.

"Where's my appendiiiiix?" the voice groaned, just outside the front door.

The old woman shivered with fright.

"Where's my left kidneeeeey?" it said, now from inside the house.

The old woman held her breath.

"Have you seen my spleeeeen?" the voice moaned, coming up the stairs.

The old woman was about to have a heart attack when she suddenly remembered something.

"Hey, you're a zombie," she shouted as the zombie knocked down her bedroom door. "You don't need any of those things!"

"Your riiiiight—" the zombie said, shuffling toward the bed.

"I know I'm right," the old woman said as the zombie leaned over her.

"No, you didn't let me finish," the zombie said, taking a bite. "Your right…arm-*mmm*!"

Addy Lee

John Kilbane brought the autographed books with him to the school. The librarian had emailed the writer a long list of students who had bought his latest collection of ghost stories.

After the presentation, the librarian thanked John Kilbane and handed him a check.

"Thank you," Kilbane said.

"No, thank *you*," the librarian said. "I've never seen the students so excited about a book!"

Kilbane nodded and turned to leave.

"Oh, wait," she said. "Here's an extra one. I double-checked the list and no one by this name ordered a book. In fact, we don't have a student named Addy Lee."

She handed him the book and John Kilbane opened it to look at the name on the dedication page. There it was: *Addy Lee*. Maybe it got mixed up with another order, he thought. He put the book in his briefcase and walked out into the parking lot.

Back in the library, Ms. Deerfield told her ancient assistant about the author visit.

"The students just loved him," she said. "Strange about Addy Lee's book."

Old Mrs. Stern stopped what she was doing and whispered, "No…"

Pale as a corpse, she then collapsed to the floor.

"An ambulance is on its way," Ms. Deerfield told her a few minutes later when she had come to. "You gave me a real scare."

"I guess I scared myself too," Mrs. Stern said. "The last thing I remember was you saying—no, it couldn't be—saying something about Addy Lee."

"That's right. That's the name the author mistakenly signed in one of his books," Ms. Deerfield said. "I told him we didn't have anyone here by that name."

"That's where you're wrong," Mrs. Stern said, growing pale again. "We used to have a student here many years ago by that name. She was my best friend when I was a little girl. She died on the way home one day when the school bus slid on some ice and hit a tree."

At that exact moment, several miles away, John Kilbane's car was filled with a terrible, rotting smell and he heard the voice of a young girl coming from the back seat.

"I want my book," it said.

John Kilbane looked in the rearview mirror and couldn't believe what he saw. He turned around to have a better look. Sitting there was a small skeleton wearing a light blue, old-fashioned dress. Long hair still clung to the tiny skull.

"Who-who-who are you?" John Kilbane stammered. "What do you wa-wa-want?"

"My name is Addy Lee," the skeleton said and smiled. "And I told you, I want my book."

John Kilbane's heart stopped. A moment later, the car hit a tree. It was the same exact spot where Addy Lee had died 67 years earlier.

La Llorona

Stanley was swimming with Miguel, his best friend, down by the river. It was hot and the water felt right as the sun started to go down on this last day of September. Suddenly Miguel ran out of the water.

"Where you going, son?" Stanley asked.

"Gotta get home before *La Llorona* gets me," Miguel said.

"Is that the story about the crying woman who's always looking for her dead children?" Stanley said.

"It's no story, man," Miguel said, putting on his shoes. "She's real. My uncle said he saw her and the next day he died."

"All right, whatever," Stanley said, shaking his head. "See you at school tomorrow."

Miguel had once told him how the ghost of this tall, thin woman dressed in white would appear after dark. She would take kids who stayed out too late or who didn't listen to their parents. Sometimes she would appear to people before they died.

Stanley floated on his back staring up at the sky as the gentle current carried him. He wasn't thinking about *La Llorona*. He was thinking about his favorite thing: money. He loved holding it and counting it and he loved thinking of new ways of making it.

The next day, he came up with an idea. There were a lot of Hispanic kids like Miguel at school, and Halloween was coming up.

"One *hombre*'s scary story is another man's gold mine," he muttered to himself.

He wasn't sure what he was looking for but after visiting a few discount stores, he found it. It was a cheap plastic letter *Y*. He bought several dozen. When he got home, he tied a length of yarn to one of the letters. That was that. All he had to do now was give it a name and convince people they needed one.

"Yo Ro-Na Be Go-Na," he said. "That's it, Yo Ro-Na Be Go-Na!"

The next day before school, he paid some kids to start saying they had actually seen *La Llorona*.

"Say you saw her down by the river at night," he said. "She was dressed in white and crying and almost got you. Tell the story in class during your share time and at recess and lunch. Act scared, like it's real."

In the next few days, the stories started spreading through the school like a zombie plague. Pretty soon, everyone was talking about *La Llorona*. A lot of kids were actually scared. Stanley's plan was working to perfection.

The following Monday he set up a little stand with his necklaces.

"All you have to do is wear it and say *Yo Ro-Na Be Go-Na* three times and she can't get you," he said in his best salesman voice. "Only three dollars. And if it doesn't work, you get your money back."

He sold them before and after school and during recess and lunch. By the end of the week, he had made $339.

"This ain't cool, man," Miguel said to him a few days later. "My mom says you're playing with fire. You shouldn't mess with things you don't understand."

"All I understand is that I'm making a real killing," Stanley said, patting the big wad of cash in his pocket.

By Halloween it seemed that almost every kid in the school had bought the *Yo Ro-Na Be Go-Na* necklace and Stanley had made almost a thousand dollars.

When his mom took his younger brother and sister trick-or-treating that night, Stanley stayed home. He counted and recounted his money. Then he took a bath.

"And tomorrow's that—what's it called?—*La día de los muercos* or something," he said to his plastic duck. "Day of the Dead. I'm sure to sell some more."

Just then, Stanley thought he heard something outside the bathroom. It sounded like someone sobbing. And then it was quiet again.

An icy chill suddenly filled the room. Stanley shivered in the warm water. The lights went out.

"Mom," he called out. "Mom!"

But he remembered he was alone in the house. He heard the crying again. And then he saw her standing by the door.

Her white dress glowed in the dark. Her dark hair hung down over her sad, ghostly face. She floated closer to the tub.

"Yo Ro-Na Be Go-Na, Yo Ro-Na Be Go-Na, Yo Ro-Na Be Go-Na," Stanley repeated as he held up his *Y* necklace.

"Eso no sirve, mi hijooooooooo," she moaned. "It is tooooo late for that and it is tooooo late for yooooooooooooooou…"

La Llorona was now right over Stanley.

"You're not re-re-re-real," Stanley stuttered, tears streaming from his bulging eyes.

A bony hand pushed his head under the water. He tried to fight, but it was no use.

"No llores, mi niño," she whispered sadly. "Don't cry now. Sleep, my child. Sleeeeep…"

Dead Man's Cave

You got no shot with Chelsea," Rick said. "She's way out of your league, bro."

"We'll see," Adam said.

The two friends had been on the hot and dusty trail for three hours now. They were heading to Lake Podimouth up in the MacLamour Wilderness.

"Let's take a break," Rick said. "This pack is murder."

He propped up his heavy backpack against a tree and sat down on a large rock. Adam looked around as he drank some water. He spotted something nearby.

"Looks like a cave," he said. "Let's check it out."

"You go ahead," Rick said. "I'll rest here."

Adam dug out his flashlight and headed toward the opening.

"Be back in a few," he said.

Rick sat there eating a candy bar and looking at his map.

"Here it is," he mumbled. "*Dead Man's Cave*. How original."

A minute later he heard a loud crash coming from the cave followed by several echoes. Rick began to worry, but a few seconds later he saw Adam step out of the dark cavern.

"What was that noise, man?" he said.

"Huh?" Adam said. "Oh, I don't know."

Adam didn't say much after that. Rick thought that maybe he was mad because of the Chelsea thing, or because he didn't go with him inside the cave, or maybe he was just tired.

The hours and miles dragged on. But when they finally arrived at the lake in the late afternoon, it seemed a just reward for all their hard work. It was an epic spot, surrounded by snow-capped mountains, and they had it all to themselves. Even the mosquitoes left them alone. The only problem, as far as Rick could see, was that Adam was still quiet and strange.

After the first stars came out, they went inside the tent. Adam fell asleep the second he zipped up his sleeping bag. Rick followed a few minutes later. But something woke him during the night. It was Adam. He was weeping in his sleep.

"I want to live," he cried. "I want to live."

"Wake up, man," Rick said, shaking him. "Wake up."

Adam kept sobbing. Then he turned to face Rick.

Rick almost screamed out loud when he saw Adam's horrible expression. His red, bloodshot eyes seemed frozen with a kind of terrible confusion and fear. His face looked gray and lifeless.

"Don't leave me here," he moaned, grabbing Rick's arm.

"What are you talking about?" Rick said. "You just need to wa—"

Suddenly, Adam began to fade away right there in his sleeping bag!

"Don't leave me here," he kept sobbing as more and more of him disappeared. "I want to live."

The last to go were the eyes. Those terrible eyes, just floating there. And then he was gone.

In the morning Rick woke up feeling exhausted.

"Man, I had a crazy nightmare last night," he said, turning toward Adam.

But Adam wasn't there, and all his things were gone. Rick packed up, not sure what to think. He headed back to the parking lot.

As the miles passed under his boots, Rick still couldn't make any sense of it. Could Adam really be so angry that he would just pick up and leave without saying a word? And over what? It just didn't add up.

When he reached the spot where they had stopped the day before, Rick saw a backpack by the side of the trail. It looked like Adam's.

Then he heard a voice coming from inside the cave.

"Don't leave me here," it whispered. "I want to live."

His heart racing, Rick ripped through his pack looking for his flashlight.

"C'mon," he said. "C'mon."

He finally found it and ran to the cave.

Adam was inside, about 20 feet from the entrance. He was down on the ground. His red, bloodshot eyes were open and staring out at the blackness. He had the same terrible expression as the night before.

It looked like he had been killed instantly by a falling stalactite.

Rick reached down to close his friend's eyes. Adam's face was ice cold. It felt like he had been dead for several hours—*maybe even as long as a day.*

I So Saw that Coming

Justin's friends decided to play a trick on him for his birthday. Jarrod distracted him after school while the three others raced over to his house and snuck into Justin's room through an open window.

"What do you want for your birthday? How old will you be next year? What's your favorite color?" Jarrod asked.

Justin became suspicious.

Why is he asking me all these dumb questions? He wondered. *Something must be up.*

"I've got to go," he said, starting for home.

When Justin got to his house, he went to his room to drop off his backpack and change. Jerry was hiding under the bed. Jason was in the closet behind some hanging shirts. Jermaine was behind a chair. They were all wearing clown masks.

The three friends had agreed to count to ten in their heads the moment Justin entered the room. Then they would pop out.

"Surprise!" Jerry shouted, grabbing Justin's leg when he neared the bed. Justin stumbled and fell.

"Surprise!" Jason screamed a second later, leaping from the closet.

"Surprise!" Jermaine bellowed as he jumped out from behind the chair.

They all started laughing. All of them except Justin.

Pale as a white crayon, Justin crawled over to the corner. He just huddled there, rocking back and forth, nodding his head.

"I *so* saw that coming," he mumbled. "I *so* saw that coming. I *so* saw that coming. I *so* saw that coming. I *so* saw that coming…"

Since that day 10 years ago, Justin has not said anything else.

He sits on the floor in the corner of his padded room at the asylum and repeats those words over and over and over again.

"I so saw that coming. I *so* saw that coming. I *so* saw that coming. I *so* saw that coming. I *so* saw that—**AAAH!**"

All the Pretty Vampires

Vampires had taken over the world.

All the best-selling books were about vampires. All the top-rated TV shows were about vampires. All the biggest money-making movies were about vampires. All the beaches were deserted. Tans were out. Pale was in. All the kids wanted to look and dress like vampires.

Vampires were cool and *oh so pretty*. Everyone either thought of himself as a vampire or in love with one. It got to the point where vampires hardly even needed to bite anyone. They just fed off all the love. The whole world was under one big vampire spell.

The whole world except for Dr. Gordon "Gordo" Chubbs, that is.

Gordo was old school all the way. He grew up back in the day when you killed vampires because they were undead and evil. Vampires were ugly. Vampires were bad. They had to be staked. End of story.

Gordo worked day and night in his lab to come up with an antidote to this curse of the pretty vampires. After years and years of failure, he finally came up with the solution.

It was all about the mirrors. As everyone knew, vampires could not see their own reflection. But what if they could? That would change everything, Gordo concluded.

He came up with a serum that allowed vampires to see themselves. But he still had a problem. How would he get the bloodsuckers to take it? Most of them were too smart to knowingly bring about their own doom.

And then one day, it came to Gordo. He would put the serum in the water supply. Of course, vampires didn't drink water. But humans did. And vampires still occasionally feasted on humans. The cure would be transmitted through humans.

Vampires began to see what everyone else could: they were pretty. *Oh so pretty.* Some vampires had not seen themselves in centuries. It was all too much, too fast.

Vampires began standing in front of the mirror for hours and hours, hypnotized by their own undying prettiness. And it wasn't long before their heads started growing, expanding, stretching until—Kapow! Kaboom! Kasplash!—they exploded.

Dr. Gordon "Gordo" Chubbs had done it! He had found a way to stop the curse of the pretty vampires.

Of course, the head exploding thing didn't exactly kill the vampires. They just stumbled around without heads. But they were totally helpless and harmless. And they were ugly. A headless vampire loses its charm fast. Most of them walked around like this until the sun came up. And then, of course, they burned up. The few smart ones—and they had to be smart to have no head and still remember to stay out of the sun—the few smart ones who returned to their coffins by day died of malnutrition.

Meanwhile, the humans suddenly woke up from their long sleep.

"I can't believe I used to love these ugly, headless freaks," people would say.

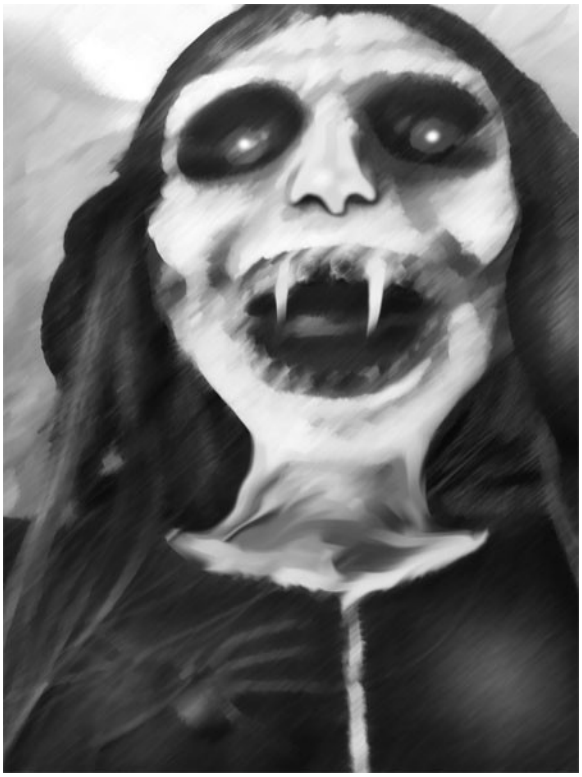
And then townspeople everywhere—doing what townspeople everywhere did best—got out their stakes and mallets and combed the countryside.

"Kill the freaks!" they shouted. "Kill 'em all!"

Suddenly finding themselves without heads, love, or sunscreen, the vampires began to disappear in record numbers.

Statues of Dr. Gordon "Gordo" Chubbs started going up all over the world. And in the ruins of a dark castle in Germany, seeing his chance, a long-forgotten, pieced-together monster started spending a lot of time in front of his mirror trying to figure out ways to become pretty.

"Fire, *bad,"* he would say, combing his hair. *"*Pretty*, good. Ummm,* pretty*, goooooood."*



Math Whiz

Sarah went outside to get the mail. She pulled out a blue envelope from the mailbox. It was written to her and had no return address. She hardly ever got any mail. Just a card from her grandmother once a year. But her birthday was in February, not July.

A warm wind blew through her hair. She opened the letter.

"Dear Sarah, See you in 5 days," was all that was written.

The next day after basketball practice, she found another blue envelope on her bed.

She opened it up.

"Dear Sarah, See you in 4 days."

A chill went down her spine. Goose bumps covered her arms. Who was sending these? It must be one of her friends having some fun, she thought.

The next day at the mall, her friends denied sending her the letters.

"I mean, really, I would just text you," Annabelle said.

"Not me," Quentin said. "I don't even know where to buy stamps."

As she walked home, she saw the postal carrier next to her mailbox.

"Good timing, girlie," the woman said. "This one's for you."

Her heart raced as if the game was on the line and she was shooting a three-pointer. She took the blue envelope and went inside the house. She opened it slowly.

"Dear Sarah, See you tomorrow."

"Tomorrow? What a jerk!" Sarah shouted. "Can't even count!"

Her friends laughed the next day as they passed the letters around.

"Probably somebody who failed math," someone said.

"Yeah, it's your future husband, Sarah," someone else said.

They kept on laughing, but Sarah felt queasy and worried that the enchilada she had just eaten for lunch would rise up and explode from her.

She walked home in the summer heat, sweat pooling on her upper lip. A few times she thought she heard footsteps behind her, but when she turned around no one was there.

When she got home, she found Scott Smith sitting on the front steps. She hadn't seen him since school had let out almost a month before.

"Hey, Sarah," he said, smiling.

"Hey, Scott," she said, wondering what he was doing on her porch.

She got her key out.

"Wait a minute," she said, putting things together. "Is it you? Are you the one sending those awful letters?"

She was mad now, could feel the rage burning in her blood.

"Yup," he said, grinning. "And here I am. Want to shoot some hoops?"

"For the love…" Sarah muttered as she pushed past him toward the front door.

"By the way, you scared me half to death," she said, turning around.

But Scott was gone.

"Guess I hurt his feelings," she said to no one. "Serves him right."

Relieved at least that the mystery was solved, she poured herself a large glass of lemonade and went to watch television.

That night Sarah was on the phone with Darcy.

"Hey, wasn't Scott Smith in your math class last year?" Sarah asked.

"Yeah, he was," Darcy said. "Why?"

"Was he bad at math?"

"Yeah, poor guy was no genius," Darcy said. "But I suppose it doesn't matter now."

Sarah explained that Scott was the one who had been leaving her notes and that he had visited her that afternoon.

"I don't think that's very funny," Darcy said. "You shouldn't say stuff like that."

“Why?” Sarah said. “What are you talking about?”
“You must have heard,” Darcy said. “Scott Smith died in a skateboarding accident *last week*.”
Sarah’s blood went ice cold before she fainted and fell to the ground.

The Diary of Flem Smith

6 September, 1620… Our ship, the *Mayflower*, has set sail for America. It will be a long voyage. I do not understand why we had to leave Holland. I was born in England, but Holland is the only home I can remember. I miss Femke, my best friend. Father says the Dutch are not like us. I do not understand why that is a bad thing.

17 September… I have not vomited for two days.

22 September… A strange man from Holland is on the ship. His name is Jan Boemann. He only speaks a few words of English. He is very thin and tall. He dresses in black from head to toe except for the large white ruff around his neck. This collar is so ghastly and white, it hurts the eyes. Stranger still is that no one has seen Jan Boemann in more than a week.

30 September… People say now that Jan Boemann must have fallen overboard.

4 October… It is always night and loud down here. The wind and the waves and the coughing and the vomiting and the other body noises fill the foul air. The darkness hides the bugs in the biscuits. Nothing hides the smells. Such wretched smells.

9 October… A most heinous sailor has died. He would say awful things. Father says he was no better than the lice and fleas that crawl over our heads and bodies. Still, I am filled with sorrow at his passing.

11 October… The storms have been bad. Our tiny ship is tossed about on this great ocean. We are taking on water and there is talk we may have to turn back. I fear we may sink to the bottom of the sea.

14 October… The *Mayflower* has been repaired. The captain is confident we will reach America.

16 October… It was my turn again to go on deck and empty the bucket. It takes all of my concentration to keep the vile thing upright as the ship rocks from side to side.

19 October… One of the men fell into the sea during a storm, perhaps like Jan Boemann, but he managed to hold on to ropes and was pulled up to safety.

6 November… A servant boy died today. He is the second. Somehow, I do not think he will be the last.

9 November… Land! Land ahoy! We have reached America.

27 November… The men have been searching the coast for a place to build our new home. They have seen savages in this wild land. I wonder what new and strange animals we will encounter as well.

4 December… It is hard to see land so close and to have to stay aboard this miserable ship. Oh, to walk in those woods would be such a thing. I am not afraid of the cold or the savages. If only I knew how to swim. If only the waters were not freezing. I would do it. I would.

22 December… The men have finally found the spot. They will build the town by day and return to the ship at night. The icy sky screams with wind and snow.

29 December… John Poundstone returned today with a strange story. In the distant trees he saw a thin, tall man dressed all in black. It was Boemann, he said. It could not be. But it was. As John approached, he saw that the large ruff around his neck was now dark red in color. His eyes were also red and his teeth and fingers had grown long and pointy. Father says it is the fever talking.

1 January, 1621… John Poundstone died today. His last words: "The Boemann is coming for me."

3 January… The snow falls silently on the dark water. December took with it six souls. The new year already two. They bury the bodies on the hill.

15 January… We are finally on dry land and off that terrible ship. We all live together in a common house. It is no bigger than the *Mayflower*, but we are on dry land. Finally, dry land. I thought I would be happier and, yet, I am troubled. I sense a darkness I cannot explain. A darkness blacker than night.

19 January… The story of Boemann will not die. It is said now he is here with us. Some of the older children have taken to singing a song: "If the scurvy or the cold do not take you, The Boemann will."

23 January… Little Jonas Gutkind's screams filled the night. "No, don't let The Boemann take me!" It was plain to see there was no one there. But Jonas saw him just the same. His little eyes still bulged with terror after he was cold and dead.

February 28… No one is singing anymore. Fully one quarter are dead. Many more will surely follow. It is cold here. So cold.

7 March… Terrible storms with no end. The world is white and The Boemann is real. I swear it. I saw his eyes last night in the dark. I was too weak from coughing to scream. I shake from fever and see him in my sleep still.

15 March… I saw The Boemann again last night. His long fingers stretched out for me. He smiled at me with his long, sharp teeth. And then he whispered in my ear, "Do not be afraid. Do not be afraid. Do not be a… AAAAAAH!!!"

***

Almost half of the 102 passengers on the Mayflower died during that first winter in America. They died of cold, hunger, and disease. It is not known how many were taken by The Boemann.

Not Joaquin

There was a creepy old hotel in a very scary part of San Francisco.

"We only have one room left," the hotel clerk said one night. "But it's said to be haunted by the head of Joaquin Murrieta."

"I'll take it," the man said.

As the man was falling asleep, he heard a terrible moaning coming up through the floor. And then a bloody head suddenly started floating in the middle of the room.

"No soy Joaquin," it wailed angrily. "I'm not Joaquuuuuuin."

The man ran out screaming.

The next night another guest was staying in the room. Just as the man was about to fall asleep, he heard the moaning coming through the floor. And then the bloody head appeared.

"No soy Joaquin," it cried as it floated in midair. "I'm not Joaquuuuuuin."

The man screamed and jumped out the window.

The following night a famous ghost hunter checked into the hotel.

"I want the haunted room," she told the clerk.

"It's all yours," he said.

The ghost hunter got in bed and started reading a book about the famous Joaquin Murrieta.

According to the book, Joaquin Murrieta was either a hero or an outlaw or both. To some people, he was a sort of Mexican Robin Hood. But to the governor of California at the time, Joaquin Murrieta was a murderous bandit. The governor offered a $5,000 reward for his capture—dead or alive.

In 1853 a man thought to be Murrieta was shot and killed. To prove that they had their man, the posse cut off the dead man's head and put it in a jar filled with alcohol. Some people said it was Murrieta, but others disagreed.

The head became the most famous head in California. It was taken from town to town and people would stand in line and pay to see it. Later it was displayed in a San Francisco museum until it was lost in the earthquake of 1906.

"And this hotel was built on the very site where the head was last seen," the ghost hunter said. "Fascinating."

Suddenly, the moaning began. And then the head rose up through the floor.

"No soy Joaquin," it said as it floated in midair. "I'm not Joaquuuuuuin."

The ghost hunter slowly closed her book.

"No soy Joaquin," the head wailed again. "I'm not Joaquuuuuuin."

"Honey, I don't blame you," the ghost hunter said, reaching for the phone. "Let me call you a taxi. I wouldn't be caught dead *walking* these streets at this time of night either."

***

For the ending to work, the reader needs to make sure that the name Joaquin is pronounced "wah-keen" throughout the story.

The Old Theater

The phone rang.

"I'm on my way," Dr. Childs said, her eyes looking away from her sons.

Courtland and Chip had been waiting all summer for *Man of Lead II*. From the trailer, it looked like it was going to be even more *sick* than the original. Today was the premiere and they were all ready to go.

"I'm so sorry, fellas, but Mrs. Matthews has gone into labor," Dr. Childs said. "I'll make it up to you."

The two boys didn't say anything.

A few minutes later they were riding their bikes in the hot afternoon sun and talking about how much it sucked to have a doctor for a mom.

"Stupid Mrs. Matthews and her stupid baby," Courtland said. "I hope it comes out super ugly with its butt where its face should be."

"Hey, you know it would be cool if these bikes were really motorcycles," Chip said. "That way we could go see the movie by ourselves."

"Yeah, but they're not," Courtland said. "So wake up and smell the *caca*."

The boys rounded a corner. And that's when they saw the sign.

"Now Playing… *Man of Lead II*."

"Would you look at that?" Courtland yelled, bringing his bike to a screeching stop. "I didn't even know this place was open again."

They were in front of the *Theater California*, the old downtown movie house, which had been closed for as long as Courtland and Chip could remember. But here it was open and playing *Man of Lead II*.

"It's meant to be, son!" Courtland said.

They got off their bikes and walked up to the ticket booth. The next showing was in five minutes. Courtland bought two tickets.

When they reached the entrance, Chip suddenly stopped.

"You know what kids at school say about this place," he said.

"They're idiots, Chip," Courtland said. "And I don't care if this place *is* haunted. Today it's haunted in a good way."

A girl stood by the door dressed in clothes that made her look like she lived at a costume shop.

"Hey, how long has this place been open?" Courtland asked excitedly.

She didn't seem to hear him. She just took their tickets.

The theater was extra dark and empty.

"This place is kinda scary," Chip said, looking around.

"Change your diaper," Courtland said.

But even though he wouldn't let Chip know it, the theater gave him the creeps too. He started thinking about the stories surrounding the place. How it had been shut down because of unexplained disappearances.

They sat down in the middle of a row near the front. A minute later the curtain went up.

The movie was awesome, with even more *killer* action scenes than the first.

"That was soooo coooooool!" Courtland said as the credits started rolling.

But when he looked over, Chip wasn't there. In all the excitement, Courtland hadn't noticed that his brother had left.

Must have gone to the bathroom, he thought.

"What's taking so long?" Courtland said after several minutes. "Maybe the fool's waiting for me out front."

He stood up and shuffled sideways down the row of seats. A sharp bolt of pain suddenly shot up his spine.

"Guess that was a long movie," he mumbled, reaching for his back.

The pain only got worse as he slowly made his way up the aisle. When he turned down the hall, he saw the costume girl again. She had her back toward him.

"Excuse me, miss?" Courtland called out. "Have you seen my little brother?"

Again, she didn't seem to hear him. He walked up and tapped her on the shoulder. When she turned around, Courtland's jaw dropped. He almost fainted.

The girl's flesh was now a putrid shade of gray. Purple and green drool ran down her chin. She was an old woman—a *dead* old woman!

Courtland hobbled past her as fast as he could. Just as he was about to open the glass door that led outside, he heard someone call his name.

"Courtlaaaand," an old voice said. "What's happening, Courtlaaaand?"

Courtland turned around. An old man was coming toward him. He was ancient and bald with large freckle splotches covering his head. And he was wearing Chip's clothes.

"What did you do to Chip?" Courtland shrieked, the terror exploding in his voice.

The old man looked confused, and then scared. And as Courtland looked into his glassy eyes, he saw a familiar expression.

The old man *was* Chip.

Courtland screamed and then the old thing that was Chip began screaming too. Courtland turned toward the door.

If he could only get outside. If he could only get past the door. Then everything would be all right, he told himself. Everything would be fine.

And then Courtland caught a glimpse of his own reflection in the glass door. An old man was looking back at him.

Dr. Childs returned home that night to find her sons gone. The police searched all over town for them, but they didn't think to look in the old movie theater. After all, it had been closed for more than 30 years. It was closed still.

The two boys were never seen again.

Hit the Road, Jack

"Make sure to cut away from you," Ana's dad said. "So you don't hurt yourself."

"Okay," Ana said.

Ana held the fine-toothed saw tightly as she plunged it into the soft orange flesh.

Carving pumpkins was one of Ana's favorite things to do. She could hardly wait for October. Every year the pumpkin she carved was more frightening than the year before.

She removed the lid.

"And now, *vee vill* operate on the patient's brain…" she said, laughing at her mad scientist joke.

A few hours later, Ana and her dad stood in front of the house in the dark, staring at her creation.

"Wow, Ana, for sure that's your best one yet," her dad said. "It looks horrifically frightening!"

It had been a long soccer practice for Jeff Keating. He was frustrated at having been shut down during the scrimmage by the defense and by his own teammates' lack of skill.

"Nice one, turd," he had shouted at his own goalkeeper as he watched yet another ball get by him and roll to the back of the net.

It was getting dark as Jeff climbed the street that led up to his house. A large, pale moon was rising over the neighborhood and dead leaves blew across the sidewalk.

Still upset, Jeff felt a terrible need to kick something. And to kick it hard. That's when he saw it there on the porch of a house. Looking extra stupid and just asking for it.

Jeff walked up quietly, grabbed the jack-o'-lantern, and headed back to the street.

"He shoots! He scores!" he shouted a second later, kicking the pumpkin with all his strength. He watched it break into a dozen pieces as it hit the asphalt.

Jeff felt much better the rest of the way home.

The next day was a good day. Jeff aced his math test at school, had lunch with Rebecca Westbrook, and scored three goals during soccer practice.

The sun disappeared from the sky as Jeff walked back home. Strolling along the quiet streets, he felt happy and full of energy.

Then something caught his eye.

He noticed a pumpkin on a porch. There was nothing strange in that—it was October after all. But there was something eerily familiar about this pumpkin. He had seen that face before. A candle burned in it, sending shadows ricocheting off the walls of the house. As he stood staring, Jeff felt certain it looked identical to the one he had splattered all over the street the night before.

"That's weird," Jeff said, walking quickly by the house. A gust of wind blew down the street, kicking up leaves and dust.

"Maybe some kids worked together, did two of them," he said, walking on.

Half way down the next block, Jeff stopped abruptly.

"It can't be," he said out loud, startling himself with the shakiness of his voice.

In front of a red house the same jack-o'-lantern sat glowing and smiling at him.

"This is ridiculous," Jeff said. "Someone must have seen me kick that pumpkin yesterday and wants revenge. This kid must be some loser to care this much about a stupid gourd."

As Jeff talked to himself, he turned up the street where he lived. He was almost home. He thought of all the things he would do. He would eat a big plateful of spaghetti sprinkled with at least half a pound of Parmesan cheese. He would watch his favorite reality show on TV. He would call Rebecca.

He was jogging now, his soccer bag slamming into his butt with every step. He dug into his jacket pocket for his key.

And then he stopped dead.

There on the doormat by the front door was the pumpkin. The same pumpkin. There was a darkness that poured from deep in its core out through its features. And then the eyes came to life with an evil glow. It looked right at Jeff and laughed.

The jack-o'-lantern began rolling slowly toward him. Then as Jeff screamed, the pumpkin burst into flames and picked up speed. Jeff dropped his bag and took off running down the street.

At first he put some distance between himself and the pumpkin, but the burning, orange ball began to get closer and closer. Jeff could hear its cackling, demented laughter get louder with each step.

Toward the end, the pumpkin was so close that Jeff could smell its burning flesh mixing with his own scorching skin.

Jeff begged for mercy, but the jack-o'-lantern just kept laughing.

Pagliaccio

Mario was walking home late one night. He was exhausted. He had worked his day shift followed by his friend's night shift at the mannequin factory. Sixteen straight hours.

"That's the last time I do that," he mumbled. "The last time."

The streets were deserted. It was a clear, cold, and windy night. Mario pulled the hood of his sweatshirt tight around his head. The wind was blowing trash down the alleys and cutting into his face.

He heard a strange, far-off sound. At first Mario thought it was the wind. It had to be. But as he got closer, he realized that it was singing. It was the saddest sound Mario had ever heard. Horrible laughter and heartbreaking sobs mixed in with the Italian words.

"Laugh, clown, at your broken love!

Laugh at the sadness that poisons your heart!"

Mario's route home took him closer and closer to the terrible sound. It had to be coming from a radio or stereo, he thought. But as he turned a corner, Mario saw that he was wrong. There was a man dressed as a clown, sitting on the curb, with his face in his hands. He was singing and laughing and crying all at once. It seemed impossible, but that's what was happening.

A mixture of fear and pity gripped Mario as he slowly walked up to the man.

"What's the matter?" Mario asked, bending over the clown. "Can I do anything to help?"

The clown kept crying into his hands. Mario grabbed the man's shoulder and the clown turned toward him. He dropped his hands from his face and stopped singing.

Mario then saw that the clown had no makeup and no eyes and no nose, just a horrible mouth with thin lips that stretched from ear to ear!

Mario gasped and struggled for air as he stumbled away down the sidewalk. He ran faster than he had ever run in his life. At first he could hear the clown singing again somewhere far behind him.

"Laugh, clown, at your broken love!

Laugh at the sadness that poisons your heart!"

Then all Mario could hear was the beating of his own heart.

After running several blocks, he finally began to slow down. Walking again, he started to catch his breath. He almost began to think that he had imagined the whole thing. But that face, now forever burned into his memory, told him it had been real. It was *too* horrible to imagine.

He started to walk faster. He wasn't far from home, but on this night each block felt like a mile.

And then he saw it. A taxi was parked up ahead. It had its lights on.

"Why not?" Mario said to himself. "I deserve a break."

He slid into the back of the cab and told the driver his address. Mario looked out the window at the buildings going by. He felt better and began to get sleepy. But after a while, he realized something was wrong.

"Hey, you're going the wrong way," Mario said to the driver. "My house is in the opposite direction."

The driver didn't answer. He turned off the meter and kept driving the wrong way.

"Hey!" Mario shouted. "Turn this car a—"

A song came on the radio. The music sounded hauntingly familiar. Then Mario heard the singer's words.

"Laugh, clown, at your broken love!

Laugh at the sadness that poisons your heart!"

Mario put his hands over his ears and began screaming. The last thing he saw was the driver turn toward him.

Somehow, Mario hadn't noticed that he was dressed as a clown. But he now saw—saw too late—that the man's face had no makeup and no eyes and no nose, just thin lips that stretched from ear to ear!

Paaa-Teee

"This guy's bought it," Bruce Babbington said, pulling a tarp over the body. "He's got no head."

"Yeah, this one too," Ron Cornelius said. "He's still got a head but it's facing the wrong way."

"It's strange how the van's in pretty good shape," Babbington said. "Like they weren't going that fast. No way there should be such terrible injuries."

Babbington and Cornelius had seen their share of horrific accidents. The two paramedics had been partners for 11 years.

They began attending to the three other victims.

"These two in here look dead, blood and brains all over the place," Cornelius said from the back of the van. "But somehow their vitals are good."

"This one's got a strong pulse too," Babbington said, leaning over the driver. "Breathing's good."

Cornelius suddenly dropped his first aid bag.

"B-b-b-Bruce," he stuttered, pointing at the tarp.

Babbington looked over.

The headless body was moving. It was sitting up. It was alive!

"That can't be," Babbington whispered, his eyes the size of Ping-Pong balls.

Just then Cornelius felt something grab his shoulder. He turned around—and turned as white as sugar on snow. It was the other corpse, the one with the head twisted around facing the back of its body. It was standing there, trying to speak.

"Uuugh," it moaned. *"Paaa-teee."*

The headless body was now moving toward Babbington.

"It's the end of the world!" Cornelius shouted. "Save yourself, Bruce."

"Paaa-teee," the corpse repeated, its arms flailing. "Paaa-teee."

"The living dead have taken over," Babbington screamed, running down the road. "Aaaaaah!"

Cornelius tried to follow, but the dead thing had a death grip on him.

"Paaa-teee," it said again. "Don't be afraid. You see, at the time of the accident we were headed to a *paaa-teee*, a costume *paaa-teee*… dressed as zombies."

El Viejo de la Bolsa

Manuel flew through the air on the park swing, higher and higher, until there was only sky. Suddenly he lost his grip and fell, landing hard on his head.

It hurt for a moment, but then Manuel felt all right. He got up off the ground and looked at the color of the sky. It was getting late. He knew he had to hurry if he wanted to get home before it got dark.

"*El Viejo de la Bolsa* will get you," his grandfather used to tell him when Manuel was younger. "He takes *shildren* who don't come home for the dinner."

Then the old man would dig his strong fingers into Manuel's ribs and laugh. Manuel didn't laugh then and he wasn't laughing now. He didn't believe a lot of the same things he did when he was little. But this story of the *Sack Man* still had power over him. It wasn't something he would admit to his friends and by the light of day it seemed like just another one of those things adults told kids to get them to behave.

Either way, the light of day was dying and his friends were probably all safe at home.

Manuel took a deep breath and walked quickly, not looking at the growing shadows of the graveyard. This dirt path circling the cemetery was the shortcut he took whenever he stayed at the park too long. His *abuelito* was buried here.

Maybe he'll look out for me, Manuel thought. He smiled, remembering the way the old man would laugh.

That's when he saw him, out of the corner of his eye. *El Viejo de la Bolsa* was there, right there among the tombstones! Tall and thin and dressed in black. Just the way his grandfather had always described him. And he was coming after Manuel!

"Waaaait," a voice called behind him.

But Manuel didn't wait. He took off running. His lungs burned, but he didn't slow down until he was far away from the graves of *el campo santo*.

As the streetlights came on and his breathing returned to normal, Manuel started to feel a little silly. It had probably just been someone visiting a dead relative. Nothing to get all streaked in the shorts over, he told himself. Well, at least he was going to be home in time for dinner.

Suddenly and with no warning, a tall thin man dressed in black appeared five feet in front of him. Manuel was about to take off running again when the man spoke.

"It's good to see you again, Manuel," he said.

Manuel knew that voice, but he hadn't heard it in a long time.

"¿Abuelito? What are you doing here?"

The man reached out his hand. Manuel took it. He wasn't afraid anymore.

"You hit your head pretty hard, Manny," the old man said. "It's time for us to take a little walk back to where you just came from."

As night closed in all around, Manuel and his grandfather walked back to the graveyard.

Live(r) and Let Die

Buster Whitaker had a routine.

"Liver, please," he would tell the lunch lady every day at school.

And every day, the lunch lady got him liver.

Since the other kids hated liver, they didn't much care what Buster had for lunch. But that changed one day in November.

"It's not fair," they started saying. "Why does he get to choose what he wants for lunch?"

Some of them started asking for liver just to see what would happen.

"Ma'am, I would like some liver please."

"Sorry, Missy," the lunch lady said. "It's Taco Salad Day!"

José gave it a shot the next day.

"I would like liver today, please, just like my good friend, Buster," he said, pointing.

"Sorry, that was the last slice."

A small group of fourth and fifth graders huddled together by the wall ball courts at recess. Buster was over on the grass, alone as always.

"Liver every day must be in his contract," someone said in disgust.

"What contract?" Lil' Ray-Ray asked.

"It's a saying, dummy," Bro Jay said. "You know, like Buster wouldn't even come to school unless they had liver waiting for him. Like he's some big shot."

"I'm sick of this special baby treatment," someone else said.

"Hey," Bro Jay said in his whiniest voice. "I want a hot fudge sundae for lunch or I'm gonna cry."

He yelled that last part across the playground and the wind picked up his words and blew them right into Buster. Buster stared at Bro Jay. It was a stare that sent icy chills up and down Bro Jay's spine.

"Punk," Bro Jay muttered.

Lil' Ray-Ray knew that Buster was in for it now.

The next day the group stood together during morning recess.

"Lunch gonna be special today," Bro Jay told them.

Lil' Ray-Ray felt a little sick. He knew Bro Jay had snuck into the cafeteria earlier that morning and stolen all that slimy, disgusting liver. He knew that Buster Whitaker would have to settle for four-cheese macaroni like the rest of them.

"Liver, please," Buster said at lunch.

The red-haired lunch lady stammered and stuttered.

"Uh, uh, well, there's a little problem."

Sweat dripped out of her hair net and down her doughy face.

"We will have your liver soon. Mary Ella is out picking it up right now. We seem to have run out. You just wait over there, hon."

Buster sat alone at a table, waiting.

"Hey, Buster. Did they forget about you?" Bro Jay said, breaking into a huge gut-laugh that filled the cafeteria. "Wanna share my lunch? Or will macaroni give you a rash or something?"

He went and sat down at the table across from Buster's. He dug his fork into his lunch and gave Buster a long look before he took a bite. He could see saliva running down Buster's chin.

"Sick, dude," Bro Jay said, watching gobs of drool drop from Buster's face. "Get yourself some Macaroni—and a napkin."

Bro Jay took another bite. Suddenly, his stomach started aching.

"Ouch," he said, grabbing his gut. Buster glared at him and that seemed to make it worse.

The pain was throbbing. Not exactly his stomach, but next to it, right under his ribs. It burned.

"Maybe you got a point about not eating this macaroni, Buster. It's killing me."

"I want my liver," Buster said, staring at *Bro Jay's*.

Bro Jay didn't know what Buster was saying. All he could hear was his own groaning and moaning.

“Give me my liver!” Buster screamed.

He was still drooling, the slimy saliva dripping down his face.

“I want my liver,” he repeated, his eyes as big as fat harvest moons.

Bro Jay looked at Buster and shivered. Then he lifted up his shirt and looked down at where the pain was coming from. It felt like something was pulling at him. He could see a growing bulge under his skin, next to his stomach. It was his *liver*! Buster was trying to steal it!

Bro Jay began screaming.

Buster just sat there drooling and pulling, drooling and pulling. Bro Jay kept screaming.

The House of Hearne

"All you have to do is bring back the dead bird before the sun comes up," Pete Molson said. "The map will show you where it's buried."

Murray and Freddy nodded.

"Any questions?" Pete Molson said.

"So we bring back the bird and we're members of the House of Hearne?" Murray asked eagerly.

"Yes, before the sun comes up," Pete Molson said. "We'll meet you down by the river at midnight."

Murray and Freddy went home and studied the map.

"Looks like it's about three miles to the island where the bird is buried and three miles back," Murray said. "It shouldn't be too bad."

"Do you think they killed the bird?" Freddy said.

"I don't know," Murray said. "And I don't care."

"And why do we want to join the House of Hearne again?" Freddy asked.

"'Cause there's two kinds of people in this stupid town," Murray said, starting to get mad. "House of Hearners and losers—and I don't want to be a loser, Freddy."

Freddy didn't want to be a loser, but he wasn't so sure he wanted to belong to this club either. If the House of Hearne Explorers Society was as awesome as Murray said, they should be digging for something cool like buried treasure instead of some poor dead bird, Freddy thought. But he knew how much it mattered to his older brother, so he kept his mouth shut.

As midnight approached, the boys packed a knapsack, put some pillows under the covers to make it look like they were sleeping in their beds, and slipped out the bedroom window.

It was a clear and chilly October night. Murray and Freddy walked quickly down to the river. The other boys were waiting for them.

"Here's a shovel," Pete Molson said. "Good luck and, oh, watch out for Davy."

Everyone knew the story of Davy La Boite. Davy La Boite was a boy who had drowned under the town's covered bridge almost 100 years earlier. His body was never found. Soon after the accident, the stories began to surface, each generation adding its own chapter. At some point the last name was changed to *LaBoo* and someone came up with a little nonsense rhyme: "Me and you and Davy LaBoo in the back of a smelly canoe."

According to some, Davy would rise up from his watery grave if someone stood on the bridge and spoke the words backwards. Others said that his ghost would get anyone who passed under the bridge at night without repeating the rhyme three times.

It was a moonless night and it took a few minutes for Freddy's eyes to adjust to the black water out in front of him. The paddle still felt cold in his hands as they approached the covered bridge. It loomed larger and more ominous with each stroke.

"Me and you and Davy LaBoo in the back of a smelly canoe. Me and you and Davy LaBoo in the back of a smelly canoe," Freddy whispered under the bridge's dark shadow. "Me and you and Davy LaBoo in the back of a smelly canoe."

"Don't be such a child," Murray said from the stern. "Ain't no Davy LaBoo."

Freddy paddled hard and with the help of the current they were soon through to the other side.

Suddenly a loud splash came from somewhere behind them.

"What was that?" Freddy asked nervously.

"Probably just a fish," Murray said. "No, I mean, *I'm the ghost of Davy LaBoooooooo coming to get yooooooou*."

"Cut it out, Murray," Freddy said.

They made good progress down the river and reached the lake. Freddy sighed with relief when he saw the small island come into view.

"There it is," Murray said, pointing his flashlight down at the map. "The bird's supposed to be buried somewhere in the center of this island."

They pulled up on a gravelly beach.

“Get the shovel,” Murray said. “Looks like a black rock marks the spot.”

His flashlight cast creepy shadows as the trees closed in all around. Deeper and deeper into the woods they walked in search of the grave of the dead bird.

“There,” Freddy finally said, pointing to a rock.

“I’ll dig first,” Murray said.

The dirt was soft. Soon the shovel hit something.

“Point the light down here,” Murray said getting down on his knees.

He dug at the dirt with his hands and pulled out an old, wooden box. He removed the lid.

“That’s sick,” Freddy said, looking down at the dead bird. It was a big black crow. Its eyes were open and bulging and seemed to be looking right at them. Goose bumps covered Freddy’s arms.

Murray closed the lid and stood up.

“Let’s get going,” he said.

They walked quickly through the forest to the canoe. Murray carefully placed the box down under his seat. They paddled silently back across the lake. Soon they were back on the river. The bridge was up ahead.

All they had to do was get past this bridge and they were home free, Freddy thought. But he had a bad feeling. Dread, like hands closing in around his neck, began to choke him.

“Isn’t there another way we can get back?” he said in a shaky voice.

“You know there’s not,” Murray said. “Suck it up, girlfriend.”

“Me and you and Davy LaBoo in the back of a smelly canoe. Me and you and Davy LaBoo in the back of a smelly canoe,” Freddy said again under the bridge. “Me and you and Davy LaBoo in the back of a smelly canoe.”

“I told you there ain’t no—” Murray said.

Freddy heard a loud splash behind the boat. A second later, the canoe rocked violently.

“Stop messing around, Murray,” Freddy shouted. “You’re gonna flip us.”

Murray didn’t answer.

“Murray? Murray!”

Suddenly a gruesome odor filled Freddy’s nostrils. He turned around slowly. What he saw would stay with him for the rest of his life. There in the back of the canoe, a green-black mass of hair, bone, and rotting flesh stood over Murray. An eerie glow escaping from its empty eye sockets, the thing just stood there dripping with evil.

“Me and you and Davy LaBoo in the back of a smelly canoe. Me and you and Davy LaBoo in the back of a smelly canoe,” Freddy repeated, shutting his eyes tight. “Me and you and Davy LaBoo in the back of a smelly canoe.”

When he looked back again, the ghost of Davy LaBoo had wrapped its limbs around Murray. A moment later they both went over the side and disappeared. Bubbles rose to the surface. At first, Freddy thought he could hear screaming and hideous laughter coming from under the black water. And then everything was quiet again, like nothing had ever happened.

Freddy made it home that night and lived to be a very old man, telling the story to anyone who would listen. Murray was never seen a—**GAAAIN!**

The Ghost of Bruddah Stu

"The Ghost of Bruddah Stu haunts that beach to this day," Molly said. "The story goes that a giant wave hit him so hard, it ripped his head clean off his body. And they never found the head."

"Yeah, and his great ghost body wanders around at midnight of the full moon looking for his surfboard—and his missing head," Jessica added.

"Those are just stories," Linda said, taking a hit off her soda. "Just stories."

"My uncle said he saw the ghost one night when he was a kid," Anna added.

"Your uncle's been eating too much seaweed," Linda said. "Ghosts are like wrestling—they're just not real."

"Hey, there's a full moon tomorrow night," Molly said. "I'll give you $100 if you spend the midnight hour on that beach alone and show us how brave you are."

"$100?" Linda said, trying not to sound too excited. "You've got yourself a deal."

The next night Linda's friends took turns digging a deep pit in the sand with a shovel. It was hard work. They had decided to bury Linda up to her neck to make sure she really stayed at the beach. They would come back at one o'clock to dig her out.

"This hole is back far enough so you don't have to worry about the tide," Molly said after they had covered their friend and stomped down on the sand. "Bruddah Stu is the one you have to look out for."

"Yeah, yeah, yeah," Linda sighed.

"It's 11:53," Anna said looking at her watch. "We'll come back for you in just over an hour."

Linda watched her friends walk down the beach toward Jessica's house. The beach was deserted. A breeze blew through the sand as the moon climbed higher in the black sky. The waves pounded the shore. There were a few tiny lights out on the water from distant ships.

Linda's feet began to get cold. The sand down there was wet. She had a terrible itch on her nose she couldn't reach because her arms were pinned to her body. It was pretty uncomfortable, but she wasn't afraid. She passed the time thinking how she would spend her $100.

Nothing happened for a long time.

Then suddenly Linda heard splashing somewhere out in the water. A few moments later, she saw a large shape coming out of the ocean.

"It burns," the shadow moaned. "It buuurns…"

At first Linda thought it was just one of the other girls trying to scare her. But as the thing came closer, she could tell it was too big to be one of her friends. Whatever it was, it was heading right toward Linda. Her heart pounded hard against the sand. Her belief that there was no such thing as ghosts was disappearing faster than a sandcastle at high tide.

"It burns," it groaned again. "It buuurns…"

As the large figure closed in, Linda could now clearly see in the moonlight that it had a head. Bruddah Stu had found his head!

Of course it burns, Linda thought with what was left of her mind. *All that salt water seeping into that terrible wound has to burn something awful.*

Too terrified to scream, Linda shut her eyes. The ghost was no more than 10 feet away and getting closer with each step. Its skin appeared red in the moonlight.

"It burns," Bruddah Stu moaned again, now hovering over Linda. "It buuurns…"

Linda's heart almost stopped. She fainted right there in the sand.

A few minutes later, Linda's friends dug her out.

The *ghost* of Bruddah Stu turned out to be nothing more than a large tourist who had jumped in the water to cool off a bad sunburn.

The Girl Who Wouldn't
Marry Nuno Neves

"When Portuguese explorers first saw coconuts it reminded them of the *Coco*, which was their word for a sort of boogeyman-ish ghost or witch," the history professor said. "So you see, because of its brownish, hairy appearance, the coconut was actually named after the boogeyman."

Julia yawned loudly.

"This guy's killing me," she said under her breath.

After class, a student named Nuno came up to her. He always sat in the back, filling up notebooks with hearts and Julia's name.

"This class I like and me like you," he said and smiled. "One day me marry you."

"Get away from me, you creep," Julia said. "Do they just let anyone into this university? I would rather marry—what's his name?—the *Coco*."

Nuno became quiet and looked at the ground. Julia walked away.

A few weeks later the professor made an announcement at the end of class.

"I'm sorry to inform you that one of our students, Nuno Neves, has died. I don't have any other details," he said.

I wonder what happened to that creep, Julia thought and then shook her head. *Must have died from a broken heart.* She had to force herself not to laugh.

The next day a sickly sweet odor filled the old classroom. Julia knew right away what it was because she hated that smell. The room reeked of coconuts.

"Makes me hungry for some curry," the professor said. "And a piña colada."

As the days went by, the smell got stronger and stronger. It started to follow Julia everywhere she went and people even began to think that it was coming from her, that it was some new shampoo or perfume she was wearing. It was on her clothes, her hair, and her skin. And no matter how much she showered or did laundry, it only got stronger.

Julia sat alone in the corner of the cafeteria one afternoon. Suddenly she spit out her milk.

"This tastes like coconut!" she said, looking at the carton and seeing that it was just regular, plain milk.

Soon everything Julia ate tasted like coconuts. She stopped eating and going to her classes. She just stayed in her room day and night.

Weeks later, Julia found herself on a hospital bed. A dark fog covered the room. She thought she heard that song they played at weddings and felt herself being lifted off the bed. She looked down and saw that she was wearing a white dress.

Julia floated down a long hall lined by skeletons. When she stopped, Death stood in front of her with his hood and scythe. In the other hand he held a burning book.

"We are gathered here…" he began.

Julia was too weak to fight, too weak to run, too weak to scream.

"You look lovely, my dear," a ghastly voice whispered in her ear. "The ring, Nuno."

Julia turned behind her and saw Nuno Neves hold out a ring in his gray, dead hand. Horrible, hairy fingers reached out for it. And then for Julia.

She saw the ring slip onto her finger.

"You may now kiss the bride," Death said.

The tuxedoed figure to her side turned and pulled Julia in tight.

Before closing her eyes for the last time, Julia saw the thing with the hairy and hideous brown coconut head lick its lips and…

AAAH!

Sketch

A monument to madness, the old State Mental Hospital sat on a hill overlooking the small town of Josephson, Oregon. Over the years, a lot of questionable experiments had been performed there. The hospital had been closed for more than 10 years now but, according to some, the screams could still be heard on quiet nights.

It didn't take long after the doors closed for the abandoned asylum to become a popular late-night destination for teenagers looking for a break from the boredom of small-town life. And it didn't take long for stories surrounding the place to sprout like the weeds that covered the dead lawn.

Shadows without explanations. The ghost of a young nurse who had gone down to the basement for some bandages and was never seen again. Bodies buried in unmarked graves in the woods behind the main building rising up at midnight. And, of course, the screaming.

But on this night, Ray and the other three boys were interested in something else.

They climbed the fence and crawled in through one of the many broken windows. Sam led the way since he had the only flashlight. They were headed to Room 202. Room 202 was supposed to be the room of one of the hospital's most infamous patients, Pierre "Sketch" Benoit. He got his nickname from the drawings of victims he left behind at crime scenes. The bodies were never found, just the sketches.

When he was finally caught, Benoit confessed to 27 murders. No one had any reason to doubt him—or that he was completely insane.

The boys sat in a circle. A candle flickered in the middle, throwing their shadows on the walls.

"Pierre, Pierre, appear from thin air," they began. "Benoit, Benoit, where are ya?"

"It's not going to work unless we hold hands," Bob said.

"Perfect," Ray sighed, sticking out his arms. "That's exactly how I wanted to spend my Friday night, holding hands with you losers."

"Pierre, Pierre, appear from thin air," they chanted. "Benoit, Benoit, where are ya?"

"Wait, I think I feel something," Sam said, leaning to his right. A loud noise bounced off the tile floor beneath him and a rotting smell filled the air.

"Sick, man!" Carl said. "Keep it to yourself."

After a good laugh, the boys went back to their chanting.

"Pierre, Pierre, appear from thin air. Benoit, Benoit, where are ya?"

After several minutes it became clear that nothing was going to happen.

"Pierre has left the building," Bob said, sounding disappointed. "I guess we weren't worthy."

Carl blew out the candle and Sam switched on the flashlight. They all stood up and shuffled toward the door, Ray bringing up the rear. Suddenly Sam turned around and pushed Ray back into the middle of the room. Then he slammed the door shut. The sound echoed up and back down the hall. It was as dark as the inside of a coffin in that cell.

From out in the hall, the boys laughed.

"Okay, good one, Sam," Ray said. "Real funny. Now let me out."

Ray pushed on the door and Sam pulled on the handle from his side, but nothing happened. It was stuck.

All four of them tried it.

"One, two, three…"

The door wouldn't budge.

"We'll look around for something to help pry it open," Sam said. "Sit tight."

"Where would I go?" Ray said. He heard the boys go down the hall and then it got quiet.

He could smell the smoke from the candle. *Too bad Bob's got the matches*, he thought.

After a few minutes, his eyes started to adjust to the dark. He could make out the bed and the crumbling ceiling and the door. He walked around and looked at some of the sketches that still covered most of the walls. It was all pretty creepy, but it would take a lot more to scare him. *I ain't some mama's boy*, he thought. Still, Ray wished his friends would hurry.

Then with a squeak, the door slowly swung open.

Ray was about to say something like “it’s about time,” when he noticed that no one was there. The door had opened by itself. He thought he heard someone whisper his name. Then he felt a chill pass through him.

A few minutes later, the other boys found Ray standing in the hall outside the room.

“Ray?” Carl said. “Is that you?”

“No, it’s Pierre,” Ray said staring at the light from the flashlight.

“I’m glad you still have a sense of humor about it,” Sam said. “How’d you get out of there, man?”

Ray didn’t answer.

Sam talked quickly and nervously during the drive back to town. He felt bad about playing that trick. Ray didn’t say a word. He just sat there. To Sam it looked like he was far away, deep in thought.

“See you later, Ray-*der*,” Sam said when they pulled up in front of Ray’s house.

Ray didn’t answer. Sam put his hand on his friend’s shoulder. Ray turned to face him.

It’s almost like he doesn’t know who I am, Sam thought.

Ray then got out of the car and walked slowly toward his house.

“Must still be mad,” Bob said as he took Ray’s place up front.

“Yeah,” Carl said from the back seat. “Hard not to be.”

Sam wasn’t so sure that was it.

Ray unlocked the door and went inside.

“Hey, Ray,” his mother said from the living room. “Did you and your pals have a good time?”

He went up the stairs.

“Ray?”

Ray walked into his room without bothering to turn on the light. He sat at his desk and took out a notebook and a pencil. He stared out at the darkness. And then he started sketching Sam’s dead face.

It's a Wrap

Billy Bob and Bobbie Jo were parked up where Old Mill Road dead ends at the southern tip of Lake Boudreaux. It was a quiet, moonlit night in late April—still too early for swimming but just right for pondering. The two sweethearts were talking about their plans after high school.

"I'm glad you're going to college," Billy Bob said.

"Wish you'd come too," Bobbie Jo said.

"I just don't kno—" Billy Bob said and stopped.

There was a loud whining sound and then a metal-meets-bone crunching followed by horrible screaming.

"What was that?" Bobbie Jo asked bug-eyed, sliding closer to Billy Bob.

"It sounded like it came from the old mill," he said. "But that place's been closed for years."

Everything was quiet again.

Then a few moments later a heavy thump rocked the bed of Billy Bob's pickup truck. When he and Bobbie Jo looked back, they couldn't believe their eyes. It looked like a body! It was just sitting there, wrapped in bloody bandages from head to toe.

"Help meeee," it moaned.

And then it started to move toward them.

"Get us out of here!" Bobbie Jo yelled.

Frozen by fear, Billy Bob could only stare.

"Come on!" she said, punching Billy Bob hard on the arm.

Billy Bob started the truck and took off.

The thing in the bandages moved closer and closer until it was just outside the window. Bobbie Jo could now see its face, covered except for the eyes. Those terrible eyes pleaded with her.

"Help meeee," it moaned again, pounding on the glass.

As the truck flew faster and faster down the winding road back to town, it hit a bump. Bobbie Jo bounced up and hit her head. When she looked behind her again, the thing wasn't there.

"I think it's gone," she said, breathless.

"What do you mean, gone?" Billie Bob said.

"It's not there," Bobbie Jo said.

"I don't care," Billie Bob said. "I'm not slowing down till we get to town."

A few minutes later, the pickup truck stopped at *Elmore's Gas 'n Git*. Billie Bob and Bobby Jo got out and walked slowly toward the back. There was nothing there. Billie Bob kept staring at the back of the truck.

"Did we just imagine that?" Bobbie Jo said.

Billie Bob shook his head.

"That would work except for two things," he said as he picked something out of the truck bed. "For starters, my 'magination's not that good."

"What's the other reason?" Bobbie Jo asked.

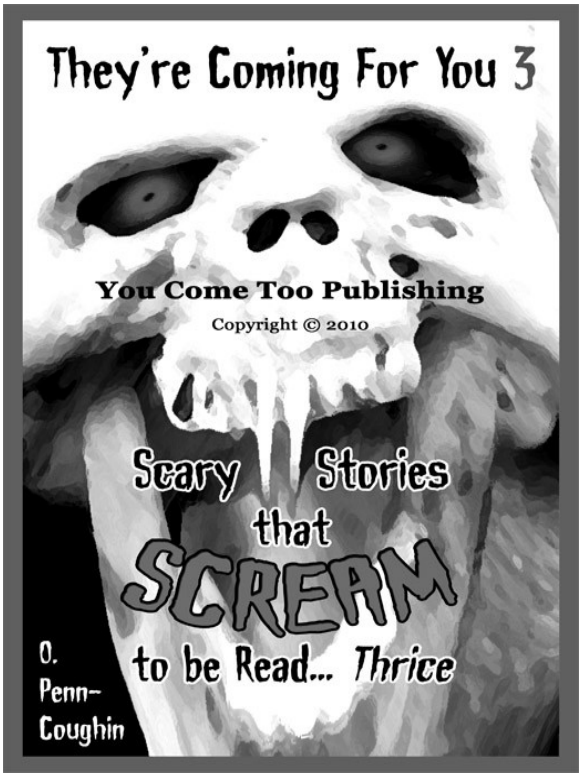
Billie Bob held up what he had just found in the back of the truck.

It was a bloody bandage.

They're Coming For You 3
Scary Stories that Scream
to be Read… Thrice

Copyright © 2010 O. Penn-Coughin
Text and Illustrations Copyright © 2010 O. Penn-Coughin

You Come Too Publishing


They're Coming For You 3
You Come Too Publishing
Copyright © 2010
Scary Stories that SCREAM to be Read... Thrice
O. Penn-Coughin

All rights reserved. No part of this book may be used or reproduced without written permission except in the case of brief quotations embodied in critical article and reviews.

For all the good teachers,
You are so outnumbered
and so gravely needed

Introduction

The stories in this series are meant to be enjoyed alone or shared with others. If needed, some of them include instructions **[like this]** on when to scream. As always though, feel free to scream at any time. If you think it'll help. **AAAH!**

O. Penn-Coughin

Going Down

The elevator doors opened and Louis stepped in. The only other passenger was a little old woman. She had a shawl pulled over her head and Louis couldn't see her face. But there was something familiar about her.

The elevator slowly made its way down, down, down to the lobby. Louis and the old woman rode in silence. When the metal box stopped, nothing happened. The doors didn't open. Louis waited patiently. In all his 58 years, he had never been scared of elevators or of tight spaces. But Louis was suddenly gripped with the feeling that he had to get out. He pushed the "open" button several times. Nothing happened.

Then Louis pushed all the buttons. Again, nothing happened. The old woman seemed untroubled.

"Come on," Louis said in a shaky voice. "Come on."

He began pounding on the doors.

"Get me out of here!" he shouted as the doors continued to remain closed.

The old woman then reached over with a trembling, bony hand and pressed the button that read "basement." The elevator began to move. A few moments later the basement light lit up. But the elevator did not stop. It kept moving. Louis could feel it dropping down, down, down.

"We've reached the bottom," Louis shouted. "How could we still be going down?"

"Oh, we're not at the bottom quite yet, Louis," the old woman said.

Louis knew that voice. He grabbed the old woman and spun her around to see her face.

It was the face of his dead mother. Her small eyes danced with evil.

"I was a bad mother and you were a bad son," she whispered horribly. "I've arranged it so that we can spend more time together. Now we'll have all the time in the world. All the time in the wooooooorld."

Louis dropped to his knees and cried and the elevator kept going down, down, down…

The Geek
Shall Inherit the Earth

"Hey, Tomato Head, good weekend?" Cameron yelled as Jen passed by on Monday morning. His friends, who were gathered around waiting for the bell to ring, all laughed.

For Jen Andrews, life had become as gloomy as the cold, wet winter that surrounded her each morning on the way to school. Nothing was going right. Her best friend had moved away. She kept getting bad grades on her math tests. And she started wearing large red-rimmed glasses that felt strange on her face.

Then, of course, there was Cameron: a mean, skinny fifth grader who took great delight in tormenting quiet and scared fourth graders every day before and after school. Lately, Jen had become one of his favorite targets.

"Hey, Bubble Butt, I'm talking to you!" he yelled.

Nothing ever stopped Cameron either. It seemed like the more teachers made him stay in for recess for "rude behavior," the more he lashed out, seeking revenge on whoever had spilled their guts.

One gray morning, Jen felt worse and worse as she walked to school. She kept thinking of all the bad stuff that was going on and couldn't think of any solutions. As she crossed the street, she felt a darkness start to grow inside her stomach. By the time she got to school, the strange feeling had spread throughout her entire body.

The new feeling was so powerful that as she rounded the corner and saw Cameron, all freckles and smirks, she didn't look to the ground like she usually did. She stared right into Cameron's mean eyes.

"Hey, Tomato Head. What's for lunch?"

Jen kept staring until Cameron looked away.

Strange, Jen thought. He usually bugs me until I get to class.

All day long Jen noticed that things seemed different. She didn't know what it was, but she liked how strong and brave she felt. She played soccer at recess and scored a goal. And in math, she finally learned how to divide. It was a great day!

But there was Cameron waiting for her on the sidewalk after school.

"Hey, Big Butt, wait up," he screeched, jogging over to her.

He was by himself.

"They'll have to fit your butt with glasses too so it can see where it's going," he said.

But surprisingly, Cameron's words had no effect on her like they usually did. They just rolled out of his mouth and fell to the ground. Inside, she just felt different. She stared at him, stared for a long time, saying nothing. She was so focused that she barely noticed that he had started crying.

"What did you do to me?" he screamed at her. "What did you do?"

As Cameron ran away down the street, Jen noticed that his own butt now seemed huge—far too big for his ripped pants.

She wasn't sure what was happening.

But she had a powerful feeling it was going to be a good year.

Cooked Goose

Dave was trying to drive while at the same time talking on the phone, drinking his gingerbread latte coffee, and switching the radio station.

He never saw the goose cross the road.

A moment later he heard the thud.

"What was that?" he said. "No, not you, Larry. Let me call you back."

He stopped his car and got out. There it was in the middle of the street, feathers and blood all over the place. Somehow the goose was still alive. But it didn't take a veterinarian to know it wasn't going to make it.

Dave didn't want the animal to suffer any more than it already had. He grabbed it around the head and gave a good twist. He had intended to snap its neck, but he used a little too much force. The head came off in his hand, more blood shooting up from the neck.

"Ah, man," Dave said. "What a mess."

Now he felt doubly bad. He thought that he should do something, maybe give the goose a proper burial. But he didn't want to stain his trunk.

He went back to the car and got the coffee cup. He gulped down what was left. Then he took off the lid and placed the head inside.

"I hope you understand," he said, first looking down at the head and then at the body. "Both of you."

He got back in the car, placed the cup in the holder, and drove off.

He buried the head in a corner of the backyard where the cats liked to do their business. He said a few words.

That night Dave had a nightmare.

In the dream the goose was angry.

"That was wrong," it hissed. "Wrong."

Dave then felt a terrible stretching sensation around his neck.

In the morning Dave woke and the first thing that he saw was the goose head on the pillow by his head. It had the same angry expression from the nightmare.

"You again," Dave said. "You're becoming a real pain in the neck."

He reached up to rub the soreness above his shoulders but couldn't. He tried again. Again, nothing happened. He just couldn't reach his neck.

"Wait a minute," Dave said. "What's going on here?"

He then looked down. An expression of pure horror covered his face. The scream got stuck in his throat.

His body was gone. It wasn't on the bed. It wasn't anywhere. Dave was just a head!

Just like the goose next to him, he was just a head!

AAAH!

Werewithal

The bear appeared on the far shore. It stood there, untroubled by the pouring rain, eating from a shrub at the river's edge. Ethan and his dad didn't say a word. They just watched in awe.

Suddenly a motor boat came into view. The roar of the rapids drowned out the noise of its engine. While one man steered the little skiff through the turbulent and rocky waters, the one near the bow stood and raised a rifle. He had the bear in his sights.

"Noooo!" Ethan shouted over the sound of the water.

The bear moved and then a shot rang out. And another. The bear became a blur, disappearing into the thick, wet forest.

The boat made its way over to them.

"How-dee," the helmsman said. "What brings you this way?"

"On vacation," Ethan's dad said.

The rifleman nodded slowly, glaring at Ethan, the weapon still in his hands. The two men looked dirty. It was easy to look dirty out in the wilderness, but this was the kind of dirty that didn't wash off with soap, Ethan thought.

"Well, we'll get the next one, sonny," the shooter said, grinning with white, sharp, perfect teeth. His eyes, though, seemed to glow with a hatred that shot deep into Ethan's soul.

"Don't lose any sleep over dat."

They both gave another half-hearted farewell nod and the boat continued upriver. Ethan and his father stood there in the mud and rain watching it until it disappeared.

"Those guys were kinda creepy," Ethan said. "The rifle seemed to be the least scary thing about them."

"I know what you mean," his dad said. "Well, come on. We have a couple more big rapids to portage around today."

While his dad lifted their green canoe over his head, Ethan shouldered the heavy backpack. He bent down to pick up the paddles. As they walked down the muddy trail, he replayed the incident in his mind. He worried about the next bear the hunters would meet.

That night Ethan had a nightmare. In the dream the hunters had turned into werewolves. Shapeshifting werewolves.

In the morning Ethan poked his head out the tent. Two loons swam on the foggy lake. Frost covered the ground. But as he stumbled outside, something else caught his eye.

There, right in front of their tent, was a bird head. The severed head of a large bird, maybe a falcon. The sight of it sent a chill down Ethan's spine that had nothing to do with the low temperature.

"Do you think it was those guys?" Ethan asked.

"I don't know what to think," his dad said sounding a little nervous.

"Man, I had a nasty nightmare last night," Ethan said. "And now this."

"I had one too," his dad said. "What was yours about?"

"Those hunters had turned into—"

"Shapeshifting werewolves?" his dad said, finishing the sentence.

"How could you know that?" Ethan said.

"Because I had the same dream," his dad answered. "Let's get the hell out of here."

It wasn't supposed to be the last day of their ten-day Saskatchewan trip, but neither one of them wanted to stay out here one moment longer than necessary, certainly not another night.

They were still about 25 miles away from their car. It would be a long day, but it could be done.

By midafternoon they reached Nipew Lake. The lake took its name, meaning dead in Cree, from a smallpox epidemic that swept through the area in the late 1700s. The wind had picked up like it usually did at that time of

day. Small whitecaps already blanketed the water. Normally these were the types of conditions that would cause his dad to start looking for a campsite or at least a place to wait it out.

"It's blowing against us," his dad said. "But it's nothing we haven't done before."

They both knew that if the wind got strong enough, it could transform a big lake like this into a raging cauldron. An open canoe would have no chance. They would swamp for sure. His dad always made Ethan wear his life vest. This time he did too. They shoved off.

It was always safer to hug the shore when out on a large body of water, but since the shortest distance between two points is a straight line, they paddled down the middle of the lake, sometimes finding themselves almost a mile from the nearest shore.

After a while Ethan turned around to look behind them. In the distant shadows of the forest, he thought he caught a glimpse of a pair of eyes. They glowed in the dark just like the bear hunter's had. Ethan shuddered with fright and drew in a long, uneven breath like a scared little boy.

The wind began to rage and howl, and at some point Ethan started hearing voices.

"It's no use," they said. "No use, little boy, no uuuse…"

Ethan tried to convince himself that it was the wind playing tricks on him. He focused on the job at hand as best he could, but there was true horror in the sound and in his heart.

"No use, little boy, no uuuse…"

Larger and larger waves washed over the bow with increasing frequency, the cold water taking Ethan's breath away. The canoe—heavy from the water it was taking on—rode lower and lower in the growing waves.

It seemed impossible that they could hold on much longer.

Yet somehow they did. They paddled like this for what seemed like an hour. Finally, the trees and rock shelves on the far shore began to get more defined. Closer. A little closer with every stroke. Relief washed over them and they began to talk again.

"We just might make it," his dad said. "If you don't sink us with the weight of all your pee."

"Have some," Ethan shouted back as he cupped a handful of water from the bottom of the canoe, flipping it over his shoulder.

A few more short portages and a few more miles on the river and they were at the car.

The sun had gone down by the time they made it to their Jeep. The little parking lot was dark and quiet. Ethan's dad put his palm over the hood and bowed his head. Ethan just smiled.

He loaded the gear into the back of the SUV while his father strapped the canoe to the roof. The car rocked as he pulled hard on the lines. They were soon on the dirt road that would take them to the paved road that would take them to civilization.

Ethan began to think about the trip and then stopped. He heard something. The voices were back.

"It's no use," they said again. "No use, little boy, no uuuse—"

Suddenly there was a loud exploding pop and the car jerked to the left. Ethan jumped off the seat. His father pulled the car to the side of the road.

"That was kind of scary, huh?" he said, sighing deeply. "I think we've got a flat."

They got out to look at the damage. It was moonless and hard to see, no end of stars filling the cold sky.

As they got busy digging in the back for a flashlight and the spare and the jack, a car pulled up behind them. It had its lights off.

Two men got out.

Cold, sweaty fingers of fear clutched Ethan's throat. He fought to breathe. It had to be the hunters. They walked toward the Jeep. Through the dark Ethan could make out that they didn't have rifles.

Maybe it's someone else, Ethan thought hopefully. At least it's not a full moon.

And then Ethan saw those eyes again, cutting through the dark, coming closer. The men both smiled, their long, white teeth biting into the darkness.

A moment later they were on top of his father.

"Run, Ethan, run!" was the last thing he heard his dad say.

Terrible screams and inhuman shrieks ripped through the night as Ethan ran through the forest.

Ethan ran and ran and ran until all he could hear was the beating of his own heart pounding in his ears. He finally stopped and stood still for a long time. Tears rolled down his cheeks onto the forest floor. It was now as dark and quiet as death.

Suddenly Ethan heard footsteps coming his way.

"Ethan?" a voice whispered. "Ethan."

It was his father.

"Dad," Ethan said, overcome with emotion. "How did you get away?"

His dad stepped closer and snarled, "I didn't."

It was one of the things.

Ethan took off running again. And again he heard the voices, closing in.

"No use, little boy, no uuuse."

Ethan was more certain at that moment than at any other time in his life. He was sure the voices were right. It was no use.

"No use, little boy, no uuuse…"

He kept running anyway.

[Start breathing hard, pause, breathe some more, and then… SCREAM!]

Harry Potter
Can Bite Me

Little Gregory Podder was sick of it. He just couldn't take it anymore.

Every other kid in school seemed to be calling him "Harry Potter." His favorite teacher had done it, and now his best friend John was even doing it.

It was "Harry Potter" this and "Harry Potter" that.

"Here comes Harry Potter" and "There goes Harry Potter."

"What's up, Harry Potter?" and "I love your new movie, Harry Potter."

It didn't do any good to explain that his first name was Greg not Harry and that his last name was spelled with two d's not two t's. And it sure didn't matter that he didn't want to be called Harry Potter. Those things were beside the point.

The point seemed to be that people were just plain stupid and that any excuse was good enough to keep saying, "Harry Potter, Harry Potter, Harry Potter!"

"I wish I were a vampire," Little Gregory Podder finally said one day. "I would bite them till they stopped."

But wishing wasn't going to do squat. What was needed was some research and some action.

How do I become a vampire? Little Gregory Podder asked himself. How do I become a vampire?

He googled it when he got home.

A lot of nonsense came up like usual. There were no end of websites and articles on the subject. There was even a vampire academy that charged $666. It was all nonsense.

"This is a huge waste of time," he said out loud.

But as he was staring at the screen and thinking how his life really sucked, Little Gregory Podder saw a tiny ad on the lower right hand corner.

It read, "Real Live Vampire for Hire: $99 a night."

Little Gregory Podder dialed the number. A gravelly-voiced man answered.

Little Gregory Podder explained the situation.

"You're breaking my heart, kid," the man said in a New York accent. "But what do you need done?"

"I need it to stop," Little Gregory Podder said. "I just need it to stop."

"Yeah, I get that, but it's not as simple as that," the man said. "You have to be more specific, such as 'Bite so-and-so or scare the living daylights out of Joe Blow or Suzi Quatro.'"

"I don't know Suzi Quatro and I guess I don't really want to hurt anyone," Little Gregory Podder said.

"I know," the man said. "You just want it to stop."

"Yeah," Little Gregory Podder said. "How about if you come to Back-to-School Night and just talk to them?"

"Talk to them?" the man said. "Well, it's your money, kid."

On Back-to-School Night the vampire waited outside the school. He was a short round man with hardly any hair.

Little Gregory Podder walked up to him.

"Are you the vampire?" he asked.

"That's me, kid," the vampire said. "You got the money?"

Little Gregory Podder handed over the $99.

"By the way, I don't think being called Harry is all that bad," the vampire said rubbing his scalp.

Everyone gathered in the gym and the principal said a few words. Just not few enough.

"Remember to support our yo-yo cookie dough sale," she said. "We're trying to raise money to buy new band uniforms. And now you are free to visit your child's—"

At that moment the vampire flew on stage and took the microphone.

"Yeah, whatever you do, don't forget to support that yo-yo cookie dough sale," he said. "Oh, allow me to introduce myself. I am Joe the Vampire. I was invited here by Gregory Podder."

Joe the Vampire proceeded to do a series of card, yo-yo, and magic tricks that wowed the crowd. The closing number just about brought the house down. He sawed the principal in half and pulled cookie dough from her stomach, throwing chucks of it out into the audience.

Everyone stood and cheered.

"That was just the best!" the principal said, pulling herself together. "Thank you so much for making this possible, Greg."

"Gre-gor-y!" the crowd started chanting. "Gre-gor-y!"

"Oh, one more thing," Joe the Vampire said. "Greg would really appreciate you not calling him Harry Potter anymore. I came here today to ask you nice. Next time I might not be so nice. Thanks and good night."

The crowd cheered again and again chanted, "Gre-gor-y! Gre-gor-y! Gre-gor-y!"

"Hey, kid," Joe the Vampire said to Little Gregory Podder after it was over. "You wanna go see a movie?"

"That sounds cool," Little Gregory Podder said. "What do you want to see?"

"I think that new Harry Potter movie is still playing," Joe the Vampire said. "I just love me some Harry Potter. Don't you?"

At that moment Little Gregory Podder turned as green as Frankenstein.

"Just pulling your leg, kid," Joe the Vampire said. "I'm an RPat man all the way."

Hold the Pepperoni,
For We are Many

The two boys had been fishing at Devil's Lake all day without anything to show for it.

"Let's try that spot under those cliffs," Matthew said. "Fish like the shade."

"It's worth a shot," Luke said, sighing deeply as he started the boat motor.

A few minutes later they had their lines in the dark water. Half an hour went by. The fish were just not cooperating.

Suddenly there was a thunderous rumbling from the cliffs. It sounded like lightning or a stampede of buffalo. Moments later a huge cloud of dust rose in the sky. The boys put down their poles and looked up. And then they saw it.

An animal flew off the edge of the cliff. It was at least 100 feet down to the water. The animal dropped awkwardly through the air.

"Look!" Matthew said, pointing.

More followed. In an instant the sky was full. There were hundreds and hundreds and hundreds of them.

"They're pigs," Luke said, not believing what he was seeing. "Pigs!"

The pigs started hitting the water with incredible thuds. Great sprays of water shot in the air. The majority of the animals splashed down near the shore, but some of them landed just a few feet away from the boat.

"This is insane," Matthew said. "What could have gotten into them?"

"Let's see how many we can rescue," Luke said.

He motored over to a group of three pigs that were swimming toward them.

"Look, there's a boat coming toward us," the blue-eyed pig said. "Act helpless when they get closer."

"I've got the one in the back," the second pig said.

"I'll take the other one," the first pig said.

"Hey, what about me?" the third pig said. "I didn't survive that fall for you two to leave me here in this Satan-forsaken lake."

"Don't worry," the second one said. "There's plenty of room inside that chubby kid for both of us."

It took a great effort, but the boys managed to pull the pigs on board. With the extra weight, the boat now sat low in the water.

"Man, that was work right there," Matthew said, breathing hard. "But they seem to be in pretty good shape."

"Yeah," Luke said, wiping the sweat off his face. "Hey, look at the way that one is staring at you. I think it's in love."

"Yo mama's in lo—" Matthew began to say and then stopped.

He felt strange. He wasn't himself anymore. Then he felt nothing. His brown eyes turned blue.

"What's the matter?" Luke said.

Matthew didn't answer.

A moment later something took control of Luke. Something evil. No, it wasn't one thing. It was two.

The boys threw the pigs back in the water, smiled at each other fiendishly, and headed back to town.

The Phone Call

Dudley Pointer wasn't crazy.

But others thought he was. Ever since his wife had died, people had thought he'd gone off the deep end.

Sure, sometimes he liked to go swimming in the city fountains. The police kept telling him that he couldn't do that, but it was hot out. What did they expect?

Or sometimes Dudley would get upset at the bistro where he ate lunch every day when they didn't properly cook the food he ordered. It was all those germs, you see. If you didn't cook something through, you could get sick and die. They didn't seem to understand that, though. He had to keep telling them.

Then one day, a few months after his wife's death, their son Jonathan came to see him. Along with a man dressed in a white lab coat.

"Pop, they're going to take care of you there. They'll make sure you get the help you need," Jonathan said as they dragged Dudley out of his apartment building and put him into a big black car. "Don't worry, you'll be okay."

But okay Dudley wasn't. The Linda Vista Hospital for the Mentally Ill was no vacation. As Dudley found out, the people there were actually insane. Not just eccentric like himself. These people were mental. Some had actually killed people, and others were really violent. The halls of Linda Vista were always filled with screaming.

It didn't take long for Dudley to realize that he needed to get out of there. Aside from the crazy patients, there were the doctors and nurses that fed him no end of pills to keep him calm. The drugs made Dudley's world gray and hazy.

And if people refused to take the pills, there were worse things they would do. Terrible things.

Dudley needed to get out. And soon, before the place actually made him crazy. He'd already lost track of how long he'd been there. He came up with a plan.

One night, when the screams had finally died down and the halls were empty of nurses, Dudley tiptoed out of his room. He walked down the hallway to the security guard's station.

Just like he had noticed on other evenings, Ralph was in his seat, snoring. Dudley quietly lifted the keys attached to the belt loop without waking him up. He walked down a side hallway, opening the metal door to the stairs with one of the keys.

He could almost taste his freedom.

Dudley ran down another hallway and could then see the parking lot from a glass door. He pushed against the door, but it was locked. Dudley quickly searched through the keys on the key ring, looking for the right one. He tried them all, but none of them opened the door.

He was so close.

And then the building's alarms went off. They must have noticed him missing. Dudley's time was just about up.

He suddenly noticed a phone hanging from the wall in the hallway. A thought came to him. If he couldn't get out of this insane asylum on his own, maybe he could reason with his son. If Jonathan only knew the terrible things that went on in this place, he'd have to get him out.

Dudley threw the keys down and picked up the phone. He dialed Jonathan's number quickly, glancing over his shoulder to see if they were coming.

It rang a few times until finally Dudley heard his son's voice on the other end.

"Hello?"

"Johnny, it's your father. Listen, you have to help me get out of this place."

"Hello? Who is this?"

"It's me, your father. I don't have much time, you have to help me. They do terrible things in here. I'm not crazy, Johnny! You have to get me out of here!" Dudley yelled into the phone.

He heard footsteps running toward him.

There was silence on the other end.

"Johnny, help me! Get me out of this—"

And then they grabbed Dudley. His screams echoed through the hospital as they dragged him away.

"I don't belong here! I don't belong here! I don't belong here!"

***

Jonathan Pointer hung up the phone. It was the third time in two weeks that he'd gotten a call like this. He'd answer, and there'd only be static on the other end. The number that showed up on the caller ID was always the same. He traced it once.

The operator said the calls were coming from inside the building where the Linda Vista hospital had stood before they tore it down all those years ago.

Jonathan didn't regret committing his father. He'd had to. Dudley Pointer had become a violent man after Jonathan's mother died. He had snapped, and Jonathan knew he needed help.

But he still felt guilty, even today, over the way his father died as he tried to escape from Linda Vista. Dudley had beaten up and nearly killed a security guard to get the keys to the place. He had been shot just as he was trying to leave through the south entrance out into the parking lot.

That had been more than forty years ago.

Small Room

Perhaps it was the challenge of it. The young couple had never seen such an old house and they were intrigued by its mystery and character. It had dark wood floors that sucked all the light up, windows that were broken, and walls that were covered with peeling paint. It would be quite the job to fix it up, but they were excited and had a vision. And at such a great low price, how could they afford not to buy it?

They moved in and got to work. They decided to begin downstairs in the living room and dining room. Also, they would organize the small room at the end of the hall and make it into an office.

Two months later, the living room and dining room were finished and looked beautiful. The walls had been painted and bright new wood floors had been installed. They were very proud.

They decided to split up to make things go faster. Jane would finish the small room while Bob worked upstairs.

Bob had scraped off all the old paint in the master bedroom before he began to wonder how Jane was doing. It was odd that she wasn't playing any music like she usually did.

"How's it going down there?" Bob called out.

There was no answer.

"Jane?"

Still no answer. Bob went downstairs and walked to the small room. The door was closed. He tried to push it open, but something was in the way. That's when he realized that it was Jane.

"Jane!" he yelled.

He squeezed into the room, and found her lying unconscious on the floor. He grabbed her and gently slapped her face. When she came to, she couldn't remember what had happened.

"Did you hit your head on something? Are you okay? Did you fall off the chair?" Bob asked, Jane just shook her head.

"I don't remember anything," she said as he helped her walk over to the kitchen table. She sat down in a chair while he got her some water.

"I just remember that I was arranging boxes of books, and having a strange feeling, like somebody was watching me."

When Bob heard this, he made a thorough inspection of the house, checking all the rooms and doors. He checked their valuables. There was no evidence of a break-in. Bob didn't know what to make of it.

"I think we should stay out of that room," Jane said.

"You must have slipped off a chair and hit your head," he said.

"We shouldn't go in there anymore!" Jane said.

Bob thought about it for a moment. Jane wasn't thinking too clearly. They had just bought the house and now she wanted to close up this room forever.

"Let's do this. I'll finish up in there, and you work in our bedroom," he said.

At the end of the day, Bob met Jane upstairs.

"Did you finish?" she asked.

"Yes, it looks good," he said.

Jane didn't go in to see it. She wasn't ever going to go into that room again.

Over the next few days, Bob began to act strangely. He seemed grumpy and upset, even though he declared that nothing was wrong. Jane became worried. She had never seen this side of Bob and wondered if he had been working too hard on the house. He was mean, saying things that she thought he would never say. His eyes looked strange too and he never seemed to sleep or bathe anymore.

"Nag, nag, nag!" he yelled, after she asked him to change the light bulb in the bathroom. "I've married an annoying old hag!"

When they were painting the spare room upstairs, he seemed in an especially foul mood. Jane decided to work in the kitchen for a little while.

"Make me a sandwich while you're down there!" he said in an angry voice. "I'm starving!"

"All right," she said.

Jane thought about Bob as she made lunch. He sure had changed. Maybe it was just the pressure of fixing up this house.

Suddenly, she remembered the mortgage. She wasn't sure if Bob had paid it. That would be terrible if they had forgotten. She had last seen the checkbook next to the computer in the office, right before she fainted.

She would have to ask Bob to go into the office and get it and she sure wasn't looking forward to that. He would yell at her for sure. Just as she started heading upstairs, she put down the plate.

"I'm just going to get it myself," she said out loud. "I'll just have to be brave. Beats dealing with him."

She crept down the long hallway and opened the door. A terrible odor rushed up, making her gag and almost vomit, like a rat had died in there. She flipped on the light. In the corner was Bob, dead—very dead—with flies buzzing around his rotting corpse. It looked like he had been there for a while.

"Oh, my God!" Jane whispered, backing out of the room. She started to let out a scream, but held her hand to her mouth.

"Where's my freakin' sandwich!" Bob suddenly yelled from upstairs. "Oh, never mind! I'll be down there in a minute!

All the Pretty Zombies

Zach Seborhea was the world's first ever zombie scientist. He was a zombie. And he was a scientist. He was a zombie scientist.

"Zombies are at a distinct disadvantage in today's monster-friendly society," he said one day. "Their brains are toast and they're butt ugly."

"I can't do anything about the first one, but I have an idea on how to make us better looking."

So Zach Seborhea began working on a formula to make zombies pretty. First he experimented on zombie mice. After countless failed attempts, he finally came up with a cream that made the mice extremely handsome. But then they died.

"I think their fried zombie mice minds couldn't stand the shock of the transformation," he said to his assistant. "I'll just have to try it out on myself."

Zach Seborhea applied the cream to his butt-ugly face.

"What the heck," he said, rubbing some on his face-ugly butt as well.

At first nothing happened. Then he felt a terrible burning. And then…

"You look so pretty, master," he heard his assistant say. "Make now me pretty too."

He had done it! He had done it!

He soon opened "Zach Seborhea's Zombie Beauty College."

Zombies lined up around the block waiting for their jars of "Zach Seborhea's Pretty Zombie Cream."

After that, it didn't take long for zombies to take over the world. There wasn't even a war. Vampires didn't stand a chance. Sure, they were still smarter, but they no longer were the prettiest monsters in town. And that made all the difference.

The bodies started piling up. Wooden stakes and garlic powder had nothing to do with it. The vampires were dying of natural causes.

They were dying of broken hearts. Their girlfriends had all left them for those pretty tuxedo-wearing zombies.

Booey, hooey, hooey…

Field Trip

We stood around the giant tombstone. Nobody was bored and nobody was talking.

Julio knocked me in the side with his elbow.

"This is some strange field trip," he said.

The tombstone was standing upright on a table and a man was holding a hose that blasted sand into the granite slab, engraving it. Julio was right. Mrs. Jones had sure topped herself this time: tombstone artist. Now that's a career.

"It's important to know the different career choices available to you," she had said at the beginning of the semester to our freshman class.

Soon the crazy field trips began. We went to a car dealership and the courthouse. Then to a bank, a bridal store, and an Italian restaurant. Now, at the beginning of spring, we stood in a large warehouse watching how tombstones were made.

The guy with the hose turned it off so our guide could speak.

"This one here is for Mrs. Edwards," he said.

The man had a huge gut and long, gray sideburns that looked freakish and was wearing a dirty blue apron.

"The sand is being blasted out at such a powerful force that it's able to cut through the thick granite. Granite is one of the strongest materials in our world, you know. This is the only way we can cut through it to engrave our product here."

In a few minutes the man had finished.

Edna Edwards
1919-2010
Beloved Wife, Mother, and Grandmother
In Our Hearts Forever
RIP

"Any questions?" asked Blue Apron.

Julio raised his hand.

"How much do these cost?" he asked.

"It's all included in the mortuary package," Blue Apron said, annoyed. "Who else?"

"Do you know how Edna Edwards died?" James asked.

"Well, yes we do, but we're not supposed to tell." Blue Apron said, looking around for our teacher.

Mrs. Jones was standing away from us all, reading something on her phone. He smiled and then whispered.

"Brain cancer. It just ate her brain away. Kind of like little bugs in there," he said, tapping his own skull.

"Okay, well, thank you," said Mrs. Jones. "Students, we need to move along. Tombstones aren't the only thing Michael's Engraving makes. Come on, out the door to the next building. Single file please."

I was last in line, waiting to move but it was taking forever.

Suddenly something touched my shoulder.

"What?" I said out loud, turning and expecting one of my friends. But nobody was there.

There was something breathing in my face. The smell was horrible, like rotting flesh.

"Dude, do you smell that?"

But Julio was way ahead of me and kept on walking, following the line out the door.

"Who's there?" I asked. I still heard the heavy breathing and then some words.

"Don't get on the bus."

It was an old woman's voice. I couldn't see her but she was right in front of me. Right there, breathing her foul breath into my face.

"Don't get on the bus, or you'll be in here with us!"

"What?" I said. "What are you talking about it?"

And suddenly that putrid smell disappeared. I ran, catching up to the rest of the line.

“That’s a good one, ” said Julio after I told him what had happened. We were sitting on a patch of grass outside eating our lunches. The sun felt good and I was glad to be out of that horrible warehouse. Had I imagined it all?

Afterwards, we visited the trophy room and then it was time to leave. I looked back at the tombstone warehouse and that’s when I saw her, standing in a window on the second floor and looking right at me. She was wearing a flowing blue dress, her head full of blackness, blackness where her eyes and mouth should have been. A bony finger waved back and forth.

“Don’t get on the bus, or you’ll be in here with us!” I heard screaming inside my head, over and over again.

I took off running. I heard Mrs. Jones yelling behind me, but it just made me run faster. I couldn’t help it. I ran and ran and ran as I thought about that rotting head full of black holes.

It was starting to get dark by the time I made it up to my front porch.

Mom met me at the door. I knew I’d be in trouble. But there was something more.

“Dave?” she said. She had been crying. Her face was red and swollen. Her eyes were tiny slits, pushed far back into her face.

“Sweetheart? Is that you?” She went up to me nervously and started poking me.

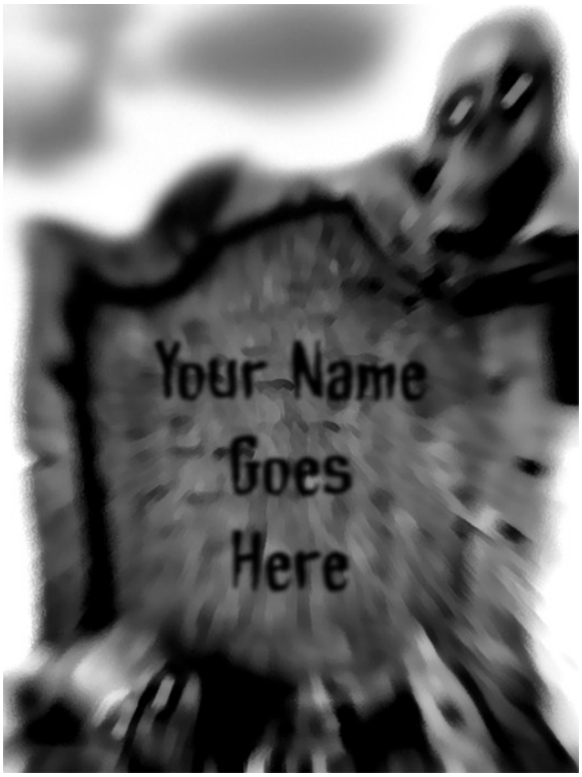
“Of course it’s me,” I said.

I was exhausted. I figured I had probably run at least 10 miles. I was hungry too.

Suddenly, she gave me a crazy hard hug, squeezing me tightly as she cried.

“We were sure you were in the river,” she said. “But you’ve been saved! You’ve been saved!”

The bus had never made it back from the tombstone factory. As it crossed the river, it skidded off the bridge and plunged into the water. There were no survivors.


Your Name
Goes
Here

La Arrugada

Oh, good you are awake, my friend. We were about to start without you. How are you feeling? What are you in here for? What is your name?

You are right, Miguel. My apologies. So many questions. Where are my manners? Dear me, I fear that was another question.

Allow me to introduce myself. My name is Diego Cervantes. And that over there is Miguel Lavolpe. Miguel, as you can see, broke his leg. The doctor says he will be going home tomorrow. I am here because of, well, it is rather embarrassing. Diarrhea. I ate something that didn't agree with me three days ago and I haven't been able to stop going. I apologize in advance if I should wake you in the night with my noises.

In any case, Miguel and I like to tell stories to pass the time. Perhaps you would like to tell one of your own. Or simply listen.

I will go first.

This is the story of *La Arrugada*, The Wrinkled One.

No, Miguel, it is not about an old woman. Please, no more interruptions.

A very long time ago there was a young nurse who worked at this very hospital. Her name was Beatriz. She was a very good nurse, gentle and caring with her patients. She was the best nurse in the entire hospital. Beatriz did not perform miracles but her patients were the happiest patients in the hospital and many of them did get better, more so than the other nurses' patients.

The other nurses began to get jealous of this. And so they worked out an elaborate scheme to get even. They enlisted the assistance of a doctor at the hospital. He was very handsome.

The nurses started writing love letters to Beatriz from the doctor. With each letter, she became more and more intrigued and at some point fell in love with the doctor. She began writing back. Finally, the doctor asked Beatriz to meet him on the roof one night.

There was a beautiful full moon and it was warm.

¿*Qué*? Yes, Miguel, just like tonight. Now, please, let that be the last interruption.

"Oh, doctor," Beatriz said sweetly. "I love you too."

Suddenly all the nurses came out of the shadows and started laughing. The doctor laughed too.

"Did you enjoy our little joke?" they asked.

"Well, back to work everyone," the head nurse said.

After they all left, Beatriz walked over to the edge of the building. She stared at the street below. It was a long way down. She thought about jumping. She thought about it for a long time. Eventually, however, she stepped back from the abyss and returned to work.

But as the days went by, she became sadder and sadder. She lost interest in everything. Even in her patients. She began to show up to work late with a dirty, smelly, and very wrinkled uniform.

Beatriz was eventually fired. She never recovered from the cruel joke and died soon thereafter.

About a year later, rumors started spreading throughout the hospital that a ghost was roaming the halls late at night.

Some said it was Beatriz looking to take revenge on the other nurses. Others said she was looking for the doctor. Some said she looked and walked like a normal person, while others claimed she floated and glowed with a ghostly malice.

All the stories agreed, however, on two points. Beatriz was no longer gentle and caring. She had become evil, consumed with a burning hatred. And she still wore the terribly wrinkled uniform.

Sometimes an unfortunate patient would make the mistake of interrupting the ghost, this *fantasma*, from her mission. When someone would call out in the night for help, the ghost would sometimes appear. And she would be most displeased.

Patients suddenly started dying in the hospital. Not the ones in critical or grave condition either. The ones in good condition. Patients who had no business dying.

What's that? You are in pain? Oh, that is too bad. *Que lastima.* There is that switch by the side of the bed. Yes, that one. The nurse will soon come with your medication.

Allow me to return to our story. It will perhaps help take your mind off the pain.

Unfortunately, there is not much more to tell. It is just a story after all, but some of the more superstitious insist that the ghost of Beatriz is real and that she returns with the coming of the full moon.

Wait. What was that? Out in the hall. Did you hear it? Did you hear the words?

"Doctor, is it you? *Te quiero, mi amor*. I still love yooooooou…"

It must be her.

[Whisper] *Por el amor de Dios*, do not make a sound. God protect us. She is coming. Our only hope is to pretend we are asleep. It is she, *La Arrugada*. She has answered your call. The door is opening. Do you smell the filthy uniform? Oh, no. Do not look upon her face. It is twisted with hate. Oh, and the wrinkles. The horrible wrinkles.

Save yourselves. Save yoursel—

AAAH!

Mine Your Own Business

It had been two weeks since that day down in the mine. Two weeks since 17 men lost their lives. His men. His friends. His fault.

No one spoke to Gerry MacMurray at the funerals. The wicked glares of the widows and the orphans said it all. It was his fault. He was responsible.

It had happened near the end of their shift. Gerry was in charge and he was pushing the men hard, trying to impress the boss man. Everything was going fine. And then the support beams gave way and the ceiling and the rocks crashed down on them. Death swallowed them whole. They never had a chance.

Gerry was the only survivor of the disaster. He came out of it with hardly a scratch. It seemed like a miracle. But in Gerry's empty heart, it felt more like a curse.

He went back down in the mine, working alone. The other miners didn't seem to want him around. They didn't even look at him, let alone talk to him. And who could blame them? He was bad news.

He pounded away at the rock all day long, throwing his rage into every swing of his pick. After work—alone, ignored, and cast out—Gerry wandered the streets of the sad, little town.

"Why?" he whispered. "Why?"

Days and days passed like this and there came a point when he could hardly remember anything in the before time. Then one afternoon right around quitting time, Gerry passed by the abandoned tunnel where the accident had happened. He saw a lantern light coming toward him from out of the shaft.

"Gerry," a voice called out.

It was Owen, his best friend.

"Gerry, you've got to let it go," Owen said. "And you've got to move on, boyo."

Owen then walked back down the tunnel.

Gerry dropped to the ground and started crying. He cried for a long time. When he looked up, what he saw almost made him scream. There, standing over him, were all the men who had died in the accident. Their terrible faces seemed to look right through Gerry.

"You cannot stay here," Owen said again. "You have to come with us."

The ghosts had come back to take their revenge! Gerry got up and started running.

"You're not real!" he screamed. "Not real!"

When Gerry finally stopped running, Owen was standing right there in front of him.

"We all died in that accident back there," he said. "You too, boyo. You've been dead the whole time. Dead, dead, dead."

Gerry was about to run again, but then he looked down at his hands. They were cold and gray—the hands of a dead man. He suddenly understood. And he wasn't afraid anymore.

"It's time to accept it," Owen said, putting an arm around Gerry's shoulder. "It's time to go home."

The Elemental

Noah was so bored. So very, very bored.

He had been dragged around Ireland by his parents for a week now, and they acted like it was the most interesting place in the world. They'd listen to tour guides, who made no sense with their wild accents, and then they would say something like, "Well, isn't that fascinating!"

It all made Noah want to barf. This was not his idea of summer vacation fun.

But then, on the ninth day of the trip, his luck started changing.

They visited a place called Castle Leap that was supposed to be haunted. As they got off the tour bus, he looked up at the towering, decaying stone building, and couldn't wait to get inside.

Noah had always wanted to go somewhere haunted. He loved all those ghost hunting shows on TV, and even tried to be a ghost hunter himself once at an empty haunted house down the street. Now was his chance for a real live ghostly encounter. He was even carrying his dad's video camera.

It was easy to give his parents the slip once they got inside. The tour was packed with people, and the castle was huge. Noah followed a long stone corridor to a staircase that led upstairs. He started filming.

"Here we are at Leap Castle, where it is said that 500 years ago the prince of the castle killed his own brother to rise to power," Noah said. "Since then, the castle has become a hatching ground for disembodied voices and ghostly sightings."

Noah reached the top of the stairs and followed another empty hallway. He turned the camera on himself, looking into the lens.

"Now, I'm going to try to use provocation to get the spirits to respond," Noah said. "Are you the ghost of the prince who was murdered? Are you angry?"

He watched the hallway through the LCD screen. He heard nothing and saw nothing. Noah sighed. The problem was that it was broad daylight and he knew that no ghost in its right mind would show up. If only he could come back when it was dark. But his parents were leaving after the tour, and he would never get to see the castle at night.

But there had to be some areas that were completely dark—it was a castle after all. Noah stopped filming, and went searching.

After walking past several rooms and down more hallways, he found something. It was a small wooden door. He opened it and was pleased to see that inside was a very dark stairwell that led down. A metal chain was strung across the doorway with a sign that read "KEEP OUT: Staff Only."

This would be perfect.

Noah had never let signs stop him before. And as he knew from watching every episode of Ghost Adventures twice, Zak Bagans didn't let signs stop him either. He threw his legs over the metal chain and pulled the door over, leaving it open just a crack. Now it was pitch black, just like he needed. He turned on the camera.

"Are you the ghost of the dead brother? Are you looking for revenge?" Noah asked, slowly walking down the stairs. "Well, I'm right here for ya, if you're looking for someone to take your anger out on."

This was a strategy the TV ghost hunters used sometimes to get the ghost to appear. Getting them angry would help them manifest.

"Oh, my GOD, I just heard a noise!" Noah said into the camera. "Are you serious right now? Dude…"

He pointed the camera back up at the door.

"That was nuts. I can't bleepin' believe that just happened. There is definitely something in the room with me now," he said.

"I'm getting chills," he lied.

He turned the camera on his own face, dropping his mouth in shock. He was overacting, just like Zak.

"If you're looking for revenge, why don't you just go ahead and push me? Show me that you're here," he yelled.

There was only silence.

He slowly walked down the stairs as he filmed. He saw nothing, but suddenly he smelled something. It was horrible, like the smell of rotten eggs, or a massive loss of intestinal control.

"Whew, it's really beginning to stink in here, guys," Noah said. "Looks like the brother's lost control of his bowels in death."

Noah had almost made it to a landing when he heard a real noise behind him. He turned the camera back up at the door. Suddenly he heard the small door above slam shut. A real chill slid down his body.

"Do you have something you want to say to me?" he yelled, his voice cracking a little.

Just as he was talking into the camera, he glanced back up at the door and saw something move. He quickly aimed the camera up and in the screen, he saw a tall black, hooded figure towering at the top of the stairs. The smell of rotten eggs suddenly got stronger.

"Oh, my GOD!" Noah yelled, except this time there was real terror in his voice.

He ran down to the landing and was relieved to find another door. It was to another room. With the light from the camera, he could see that it had stone walls and floors. Chains were bolted to the walls.

There was something on the ground in the corner. Noah walked over and slowly realized what it was. Cameras! The remains of dozens and dozens of cameras, ripped to shreds!

"Oh, my—" Noah said, never finishing the last word. He tried to scream, but it was no use.

***

Meanwhile, back on the tour, Noah's parents were enjoying the tour guide's candor about the spirits said to haunt Castle Leap. Of course, he said, the guidebooks wrote about the murdered prince who haunted the grounds. But there was something else that inhabited the castle: a malevolent entity that caused people to get hurt. It was said that the Elemental, as it was called, lived in a small dungeon at the bottom of the castle.

"Don't ya worry, folks, we never take groups down there," the tour guide said, laughing. "Besides, you'll know he's around. People say that whenever The Elemental is present, the room reeks of sulfur. Can't miss that!"

Aerial Burial

The trail seemed to go on forever.

"Dad, when are we going to be there?" Sally moaned.

"It has been a long day," her mom said, straining from the weight of her backpack.

"Any minute now, you two," Bill Burtleson answered.

The truth was they should have been at the lake by now. They had to be close he told himself.

It seemed like just a little while ago the sun was high in the sky, and even though the forest was dense with trees and brush, it had been bright compared to how it was now. Now, the light was quickly disappearing, and the forest had turned into dark gray twilight.

Soon it would be too dark to keep going, and they would have to give up trying to get to a good campsite along the secluded mountain lake described in the guidebook.

"Okay, here's what we're going to do," Bill said. "You two can leave your packs here and when we reach the lake, Bill Jr. and I will come back and get the packs while you set up the tent."

"Deal," Moira Burtleson said, dropping her pack in the middle of the trail. Sally dumped hers next to it.

That helped them go a little faster at first, but after half an hour they still hadn't reached the lake. Dark gray was quickly turning into sinister black.

"We're going to have to camp around here somewhere," Bill said, feeling foolish. "Let's find a flat spot for the tent."

They wandered off the trail for a few minutes.

"This doesn't look so bad here," Moira said. "We'll spruce it up and have dinner ready by the time you get back."

"All right, Bill Jr.," Bill said. "Let's go back for those packs."

"Dad, can I go instead?" Sally said.

"I thought you were tired," her dad said.

"I feel a lot better," she said.

"Okay, I don't think Bill Jr. will mind," her dad said.

"Suits me just fine," Bill Jr. said.

Bill pulled out the flashlights and handed them out. Then they headed off.

"It's kind of scary out here," Sally said after a while.

She's right, Bill thought.

He started talking to get their minds off the creepiness of the black forest.

"You know, I think there's an old Native American burial ground around here somewhere," he said at some point.

He began to regret having said it, but Sally didn't seem scared. In fact, she started asking about it.

Bill went on to explain how some tribes used to hang their dead up in the trees instead of burying them. Sometimes the bodies were placed on simple platforms. In some cases, a canoe might be built and stuck up in the trees with the corpse of a chief inside.

"That's pretty cool," Sally said.

It wasn't much longer before they found the backpacks and started heading back.

"Boy, I'm starving," Bill said. "How 'bout you?"

"Me too," Sally said.

After a while, she started thinking about the burial ground. She began to think about which way the dead bodies faced and how they looked. She wondered whether pieces of rotting flesh would tumble down from the trees when the corpses decomposed.

Soon Sally was too scared to look up at the trees. She kept her eyes glued to the small spot of ground illuminated by her flashlight.

"I think we've gone too far," her dad said. "I should have marked the spot where we left the trail."

"Not cool, Dad," Sally said. "Not cool."

They turned back down the trail.

“I hope they have a fire going,” Bill said. “It’ll make it easier to find them.”

They stumbled back up and down the trail several more times. At some point Sally thought she heard distant chanting and drumming coming through the trees.

“There!” her dad finally shouted.

Sally looked up and saw the beam of his flashlight bouncing against the walls of their bright yellow tent. They had made it!

“I guess they weren’t able to build a fire,” Bill sighed. “I’ll get one going in no time.”

Sally unzipped the tent and poked her head inside. There was no one there.

“Where’d they go?” she said.

“Maybe they’re digging a toilet pit,” Bill said.

A few drops of rain began to fall.

Odd, Bill thought. There hadn’t been a cloud in the sky earlier.

He began to look for the tent’s rain fly cover when he suddenly heard a bloodcurdling scream. He turned around to see Sally looking up into the sky, pointing her flashlight. There were wet, red streaks across her face.

Bill aimed his flashlight up to where she was looking. He could see something suspended in the treetops. It was—

AAAH!

Killed by Kooties

Morley Mortimer was the creepiest kid in school. His face was covered with hideous pimples that were constantly bubbling up and erupting like the mudpots of Yellowstone. His nose was always running like someone training for a marathon. And he was always drooling like a leaky toilet.

In short, Morley was a poster child for the kooties.

One day after school, the coolest kid in school, Roger Reeves, was practicing free throws in the gym.

"Those free throws aren't gonna make themselves," the coach had said. "You need to spend as much time practicing as you do standing in front of the mirror."

Yeah, yeah, yeah, Roger thought. And how does he know how much time I spend in front of the mirror?

After shooting his tenth brick in a row, he went over to take a drink from his water bottle.

Then he went back to the line and missed another shot. Badly.

That's when Morley walked in.

"Hey, Roger," he said, as spit flew out of his mouth. "You trying to make a basket or are you building a house?"

"Good one, More," Roger said. "What brings you here?"

"Oh, I forgot my water bottle," Morley said.

Roger watched Morley walk over and pick up his water bottle.

"Hey, that's mi—" Roger began to say and stopped. He remembered at that moment that he had forgotten his own water bottle back at his desk. And then the sick realization hit him like a ton of free throws that he had just taken a drink from that water bottle over there. Morley's water bottle!

"You okay, Roger?" Morley said as he wrapped his lips around the bottle's valve. "You look a little sick."

"Sick? Sick!" Roger's mind screamed. "I'm dying here!"

For the rest of the day, Roger did his best to think about something else. But he couldn't get his mind off it. Those lips touching his lips. That drool going in his mouth and down his throat. Those Morley germs coursing through his body. Those germs. Those Morley germs! Ah!

Roger didn't eat dinner that night and went to bed early.

He woke up at some point, needing to go to the bathroom. After he had finished he caught a glimpse of his face in the mirror.

No. It couldn't be. His face was covered with pimples. Snot was running down his nose in thick gobs. He was drooling. Just like Morley. Just like Morley.

The next morning his mom found Roger in bed, a look of complete horror on his face. He was dead.

The autopsy revealed that he had died of a heart attack.

"His heart was in perfect shape," the coroner said. "It's as if he died of a great and terrible fright."

The man at the funeral home was grateful for having so little work to do.

"Such a handsome young man," he told Roger's family. "Such a perfect face. I couldn't find a single mark on him. Not even as much as a pimple."

Wendigo Psychosis

It was a beautiful day. The snow that had been falling steadily for two weeks had finally stopped, making way for an icy blue sky. The mountains that surrounded the small Wyoming town looked bodacious.

Josh wished he could get up there. As he started driving toward his high school, he was thinking about cross-country skiing and decided to just turn around. With his skis already in the car, it was just a matter of navigating up the slick, winding roads.

He arrived at the trailhead and parked. It wasn't surprising to find that he was the only one there. He checked the backpack that was always stored in the Jeep and found plenty of water and snacks. His plan was to go out for just an hour or two, then maybe head back to catch his afternoon classes.

The trail wound through a dense forest of pine trees. Everything was plastered with thick white snow. He was happy to see that he was the first and only skier on the trail. He was making new tracks, which meant he wasn't going to be able to go very fast.

After about an hour, Josh stopped to take some pictures. He unzipped his backpack and looked around. That's when he noticed it. A little way down from where he stood were fresh footprints alongside his ski tracks, as if somebody were following him.

"This can't be," he said.

He hadn't seen anybody and there had been no other cars in the lot.

He took a few pictures and started up again.

In a little while he stopped and again found footprints behind him, right beside his tracks.

"What in the Devil is going on?" he whispered.

Nobody was around for miles. In fact, he hadn't seen another person, bird, or animal the entire morning.

He stared at them and to his horror, he actually saw footprints being formed right in front of his eyes, heading closer!

Josh started skiing harder, now sure that somebody or something was stalking him. He could almost feel eyes on his back, but he had no logical explanation for what it was.

When he stopped to catch his breath, he dreaded looking back. But he did. And again there were footprints, coming up the ridge toward him. A chill shot through his body.

Something was really there! Something he couldn't see.

"Who's there?" he shouted.

Only his echo answered back.

Josh ended up going much farther than he originally planned. He looked at his watch.

"I've got to turn around if I want to get back before dark," he said.

He took off. There was nothing to do but ski back toward whatever was headed his way.

***

Jeremiah Smith was having a terrible month. The winter had been difficult, so very difficult. Recent storms had dumped at least two feet of snow, which made trapping and hunting down right impossible.

As he stepped out of his shelter, his stomach growled. He was starving and weak, but was happy to finally see a blue sky. He put on his buckskin coat and coonskin hat. Although it had stopped snowing, it was extremely cold.

His food supply was beyond running low—it was just plain out. He had finished off the leg a week ago. The leg he had cut off a dead Indian he had found.

At first the meat tasted odd but by the end, Jeremiah was sure he had never eaten anything as delicious.

Jeremiah stood by the fire, sipping the last of his coffee-flavored water. Just a hard winter, that's all. He had lived out here three years already. He would get through this. Things would turn around.

He loved the peace and serenity of the mountain man life. He recalled back to when he had first heard about men going off to the west, to live off the land and trap and hunt animals. It sounded like paradise. He had been a

soldier in the Mexican American War and had been forced to do many bad things. He wanted to spend the rest of his life forever away from other men and their politics. He was never going back.

He made sure he had all his gear for a day of hunting: his Hawken rifle, Bowie knife, and powder horn. Then he walked into the woods.

When he walked over a ridge, he hesitated. Up ahead was an Indian burial ground. He didn't like to cross over such things. Bad luck. But the way he saw it, he had to search everywhere for food, even there. Besides, he thought he had seen something moving in the trees.

Jeremiah crossed the burial site as fast as he could. He would just put it out of his mind and focus on the hunt. If he had to track the beast all day, he would. He would wait and make the one shot from his Hawken's count.

For a long while he followed his prey. It was leaving strange tracks in the snow. He couldn't make out what it was. It ran like an animal but left tracks like a sled. Could have been another mountain man or Indian. At this point, he didn't care.

The prey would dart ahead, but Jeremiah was always able to catch up. After a while, he felt good about his chances. He could smell the tender meat cooking over an open fire. It made his mouth water just thinking about it. He hoped the meat would taste as sweet as that leg had.

Jeremiah stopped and took careful aim. And then the strangest thing happened. Right on top of a small hill, the beast turned and headed right toward him.

He took aim. Finally, his luck was changing.

The Woman
in the Painting

The hotel room was small but had everything Jim Chin needed for the night: a bed, a desk, and a bathroom.

He opened his computer and checked email and the day's news. After a while, he looked up and studied the painting that hung over the desk. It was almost like a mirror, reflecting the room behind Jim. Everything was just as it was in the room. There was the desk and the bed and chair by the window. The only difference was that a woman was sitting in the chair. Jim could only see the back of her head. She had her gray hair up in a bun and a lavender-colored ribbon around her neck. Everything about the scene was from another time. A simpler, old-fashioned time.

It had been a long day. After flipping through the television channels several times, Jim began to get sleepy. He soon drifted off, the remote still in his hand. The bed was comfortable, and the hotel and street outside quiet. But Jim didn't sleep well. He tossed and turned and tossed and turned some more.

At one point during the night, the smell of perfume or flowers filled the room. Jim wasn't very good at identifying flowers but he thought they might be lilacs.

Jim sat up and looked around the room. Nothing seemed out of the ordinary. But then as he looked at the painting, the woman in the chair suddenly turned toward him. There was no long black hooded robe, no scythe. In fact the old woman looked right at him and smiled in a kind, friendly way. Yet at that moment Jim knew as sure as he knew anything in this world, that this was the face of death.

And he knew that she was coming for him.

When the alarm clock went off in the morning, Jim still felt sleepy. But he was relieved that the nightmare had just been a dream. Nothing more.

He got up and packed his bag. The painting was just as he had first seen it. The woman was sitting with her back to Jim. He went downstairs and checked out of the hotel.

On her 12th floor balcony an ancient woman watered her garden. She smiled up at the sun. She had a ribbon around her neck. The old woman suddenly slipped on a wet tile and bumped into a large pot of flowers that was balanced on the railing. The pot of light purple flowers teetered for a moment and then fell over the side. Down, down, down it dropped toward the street below.

At that same moment Jim stepped out onto the sidewalk. A second later there was a skull-shattering crash and then screams from the people on the street.

Le Père Fouettard

"Wait for me, girl," the voice called out. "I won't hurt yooooooou…"

Abby ran as fast as she could down the dark cobblestone street, but the footsteps kept getting louder and closer.

"Wait for me, girl," the voice said again. "I won't hurt yooooooou…"

Abby's heart pounded away like a mechanical monkey beating his drum.

She looked over her shoulder but still couldn't see the figure's face.

"Wait for me, girl. I won't hurt yooooooou…"

"No!" she screamed. "Nooo!"

And then she woke up.

This same dream had haunted her sleep for the last six nights. The only difference was that each time the shadow figure got closer. She had a feeling of dreadful certainty that when the thing caught up to her, she would die in the dream—and in real life.

"You look terrible," her mom said the next morning. "Another nightmare? Maybe you can take a nap when you get home from school."

That's right, Abby thought. We have show-and-tell in French class today.

Abby finished her orange juice and went back to her room.

She reached up on the highest shelf and brought down the odd Santa Claus doll her dad had recently brought back from France for her.

Abby had stopped believing in old St. Nick a few years ago, but she still loved to collect the dolls.

This doll was dressed all in black with a black beard to boot. Even its eyes were completely black with no whites showing. Its expression was also dark and angry. He carried a stick and an empty sack.

Abby thought the doll was rather strange looking, but that wasn't all that unusual. Each doll was just the artist's interpretation. No two were alike. Most were jolly. But some looked a little scary.

When it was her turn, Abby walked up to the front of the class with the doll.

"*Bonjour*," she said. "*Voici mon poupée de Père Noel*."

The teacher smiled and interrupted.

"That is not Santa Claus," she said in English with a heavy French accent. "That is Père Fouettard."

Abby looked confused.

"Take a seat, *mon cher*," the teacher said. "I can explain it to you after class."

Later the teacher told her all about Père Fouettard. It turned out that he was Santa Claus' assistant. His job was to punish the bad kids with his stick.

"The story has been cleaned up and made politically correct throughout the years," the teacher said. "But it began as a typically grisly fairy tale.

"Some of the earliest accounts state that Père Fouettard was a butcher who chopped up three young boys for their money and used the meat in a stew. When Père Noel, to you Santa Claus, heard about this he brought the boys back to life and made Père Fouettard into his assistant."

"That's a pretty weird story," Abby said. "I mean, *ce très bizarre*."

On her way home it struck her that she had started having the nightmare right about the time her dad had given her the doll. She decided to put it somewhere else in the house.

She didn't want to hurt her father's feelings, so she had to think of an appropriate place for Père Fouettard. But for now he would go in the back of the coat closet by the front door.

That night, Abby looked up at her collection.

"Good night, Santas," she said, turning off the light.

She soon fell into a deep sleep.

And then the dream came back. Abby was being chased again.

"Wait for me, girl," a voice called out behind her. "I won't hurt yooooooou…"

The dark figure was close now, closer than he had ever been. The footsteps were right behind her.

Abby felt a pain in her ankle.

A moment later she woke up screaming. Her dad rushed into the room.
“That was a bad one, huh?” he said.
“It was so real,” Abby sighed. “My leg still hurts.”
She pulled the covers off and saw several red welts around her ankle.
“How can that be?” Abby screamed.
Hiding under the foot of the bed, the doll smiled.
“I won’t hurt you, girl,” he whispered in a French accent. “Next time I’ll just kill you.”
AAAH!

Blood Test

Nathan was always getting into accidents. Broken bones, chipped teeth, and sprained ankles were everyday events. So when he woke up in a hospital room in pain, he wasn't all that surprised.

He looked up at the ceiling, trying to piece together what had happened. It had been a crisp autumn morning. He remembered the crunch of the leaves beneath his rubber bicycle wheels as he hurried to class. The street was just coming up where he would cross and…

It had all happened so suddenly. Then he felt his body land with a thud on the pavement, followed by sharp jolts of pain. And then just blackness.

"He's awake," a loud, unfamiliar voice boomed.

"Oh, Nathan!" his mom said, now leaning over him. "We were so worried about you."

"You had quite the close call there, son," his dad said. "But don't worry, you're gonna be just fine. Isn't that right, doc?"

"Oh, yes," the unfamiliar voice said. "With several weeks of proper rest, he should be able to go back to the playground with the other little school children."

"Thank you so much, Dr. Sconosciuto," his mother said.

Nathan painfully turned his head to look at the doctor for the first time. He had black eyes and a thick beard that engulfed his face and he was smiling. A smile that made Nathan's skin crawl, though he didn't know why. The doctor then disappeared out the door and down the hall.

"How long do I have to be here for?" Nathan asked, groggily. "I want to go home."

"The doctor said it's going to be a few days, maybe a week," his mother said, holding the hand of his non-broken arm. "But don't worry, Nathan. You'll be home before you know it."

The days passed by slowly in the bleak hospital room. Even the slightest movement caused intense discomfort. Nathan wished he could just go home and play God of War on his PlayStation.

But the boredom and the pain were minor compared to the creepiness of Dr. Sconosciuto. There was just something about him that made Nathan feel like running down the hall screaming in his hospital gown, broken arm and all. One night Nathan woke up to find Dr. Sconosciuto hovering over the bed, looking down at him with those dark, dark eyes.

Nurse Allerton had told him that Dr. Sconosciuto was one of the best doctors at the hospital. She had also said she would trust him with her life. But looking up into those freaky eyes that night, Nathan didn't feel quite so confident about putting his own life in the doctor's hands.

Nathan felt weak. He heard the nurse tell his parents that he had low-blood pressure, but that it was normal given his condition. He drifted in and out of sleep and had strange dreams.

At some point a large crash from somewhere out in the hall jarred him awake. He glanced over at the clock. It was almost two in the morning. The rain was hammering on the window outside. Maybe someone had just dropped a tray of food or something, but Nathan had a bad feeling about the sound. He rubbed his eyes and threw his legs over the side of the bed.

The tile floor was cold and clammy against his bare feet. The hall was completely empty and dead quiet. It hurt to walk, but he slowly dragged himself down the silent hall. There was a desk where a night nurse should have been, but nobody was there. He made it to a room farther down the hall where he thought the sound might have come from. The door was wide open.

Nathan felt his skin crawl and knew who was there before he even saw the silhouette. It was Dr. Sconosciuto, with his back to the door, standing over a patient. Nathan couldn't tell what he was doing. He thought he heard a terrible slurping sound. He began to slowly back away from the room.

"What are you doing out of bed, Nathan?" Nurse Allerton said, coming from behind him. Just at that moment, Dr. Sconosciuto came out of the room. Nathan couldn't find his voice to scream. He could only keep backing up—running right into Nurse Allerton.

Nathan grabbed her arm tightly with his good hand.

"Do you see what he did?" he asked, his voice frantic and cracking. Dr. Sconosciuto walked up to the two of them.

“Nurse, what is this young man doing out of bed?” he said as he continued writing on a chart. He rubbed his eyes.

“I was away from my desk. I’ll escort him back to his room.”

“I’m beat. That was my last patient and now I get to go home. It’s been a long night,” the doctor said, handing her the chart. “Have a good night, nurse. And Nathan, get some rest.”

“Good night, Dr. Sconosciuto,” Nurse Allerton said.

Relief flooded Nathan’s body. Dr. Sconosciuto was perfectly normal. Just attending to patients, that’s all. What had he been thinking? The bike accident must have done something to his brain.

“Sorry to have been a problem,” Nathan said.

Nurse Allerton just smiled. And to Nathan’s horror, he saw her fangs hanging over her lower lip, stained in red.

Nathan never got better.

Piano Lesson

No one knew exactly how old Mrs. Maugham was, but she had to be close to a hundred. She loved her piano and her garden. Early each morning she worked in the garden and then opened all the curtains and played the piano. She played so beautifully that even people who didn't like classical music would stop in front of the house to listen.

It seemed that things would always be this way, but then one day the man who owned the house sold it. Mrs. Maugham hoped she could continue to keep renting from the new owner.

"Oh, dear," the old woman said when the new owner, a man named Wilson, told her he intended to live there himself. "Oh, dear."

He gave her one month to move out.

"Oh, dear," was all Mrs. Maugham could say. "Oh, dear."

Soon after that, Mrs. Maugham stopped working in her garden. Then she stopped playing her piano. Then she died.

Wilson threw out all her things except for the piano, and moved into the house.

The first night in the house, Wilson woke up during the night and heard the piano. When he got up, the music stopped. He walked downstairs and saw that all the curtains facing the dead garden had been opened.

This went on every night for more than a week until Wilson finally had the piano taken away.

This only made things worse. Now the music played all night. Other than the open curtains, everything else seemed normal. There was no piano. And yet the piano kept playing.

Not having slept for days, Wilson began losing his mind.

Late one night, a neighbor called the police. The officers found Wilson out in the middle of the street.

"Can't you hear it?" he kept screaming. "Can't you hear it?"

"He says he hears a piano playing," one of the neighbors said. "I don't know what he's talking about."

The officers took Wilson inside.

"There," Wilson said, his crazed eyes dancing around the living room. "Don't you hear it?"

The officers both shook their heads.

"Best get some sleep, Mr. Wilson," one of them said. "And don't make us come back out here.

The police drove away and inside the house Wilson cried, "Don't you hear it? Don't you hear it? Don't you hear it…"

A few days later the house mysteriously burned down to the ground. The firefighters arrived at the scene too late to save him, but they said that after Wilson's screams finally died down, a piano could be heard playing.

That Day in Dallas

Dan was driving through Dallas, Texas. He had just finished a week of very successful business meetings and was now on his way to the airport. He smiled as he looked out on the crowded freeway.

"I tell you what," Dan said in a bad Texas accent. "How 'bout them Cowboys."

"In point two miles keep left," the GPS voice said. "Keep left."

"Now you tell me," Dan sighed.

He looked over his shoulder and then in his rearview mirror. There were too many cars and there was no way he was going to make it—not with the way these people drove.

"Stay left," the GPS kept repeating as Dan failed to follow the last-minute directions. "Stay left. Recalculating. Recalculating."

Dan got off at the next exit.

"Let's try that again, shall we, sweetheart?" he said to the device.

He drove through a dark underpass and came out on to a park surrounded by tall buildings and blue skies.

"This looks so familiar," Dan said out loud. "It's almost like I've been here before."

At each intersection the computerized female voice told him to turn right. He was soon back in the same place.

"C'mon now, little lady," Dan said to the GPS. "I don't want to miss my plane."

After making yet another right turn, Dan looked out at the grass and was struck by a feeling of terrible dread and heartbreaking sorrow. The emotions were so strong, he suddenly felt like crying.

A few minutes later, he was back at the green downtown park. He pulled over and stopped the car.

"Recalculating," the GPS said. "Recalculating."

"You better recalculate!" Dan said, getting angry.

"Continue nineteen point six three miles," the voice said.

"Ah, for the love of Tony Romo!" Dan said as he brought down his fist on the dashboard.

Suddenly sparks flew from the GPS. Dan felt a strong electrical current pass through him and had to close his eyes as a bright light engulfed the car.

"Save him," the GPS said in a shrill voice. "Save him."

"Forget this," Dan sighed, turning off the navigation system. "I'll just get to the airport the old fashioned way: I'll ask directions."

Dan got out of the car and noticed that everyone was dressed strangely, as if they had just left the set of Mad Men, that TV show set in the early 1960s.

"Save him," the GPS somehow kept repeating behind him. "Save him."

People were lining the sidewalk. The cars were all old. Police officers were blocking off the streets.

Maybe they're having some sort of old timer's parade, Dan thought.

"Excuse me, can you tell me how to—" Dan said to a man walking by. "Wait, what's going on here?"

"President Kennedy is coming through here in a few minutes," the man said. "Better get your place."

"President Ke—don't you mean Pre—" Dan asked. "Hey, what year is this?"

Dan knew it was a foolish question. It was a foolish question because somehow he already knew the answer, even before the man answered.

"Have you hit your head, boy?" the man said, shaking his. "What year is this! Why, it's a little somethin' that 'round these parts we like to call 1963."

"Nineteen sixty-three," Dan repeated slowly as the man walked away. "Of course, that's the grassy knoll right there. This is Dealey Plaza. I've seen it so many times on TV."

The crowd in the distance started cheering.

"This is crazy," Dan mumbled.

He looked up and saw the presidential motorcade come into view. He saw the First Lady dressed in pink. The old grainy films began to replay in his head. Dan knew that in minutes, maybe seconds, that pink suit would be covered in bone, blood, and brains.

"Maybe there's still time," Dan said and started running.

He began waving his arms in the air.

"No! Stop! Go the other way! Turn around! Turn around! Stop! Stop!"

It was no use. The limousine just kept coming down the street toward him. The President was waving to the crowd.

"No!" Dan screamed as he looked up at a shiny reflection coming from an open window in an old brick building. "Noooooo!"

A moment later he heard a shot. And then another.

Dan dropped to his knees.

"Noooooo!"

Horse of Horrors

Isaac stumbled across the gray horse while out hunting on the plains one day. It was a rare sight, a horse all alone, grazing in the tall golden stalks of grass. Isaac searched high and low for the owner, because a horse thief Isaac wasn't. But after not seeing anyone for miles in all directions, Isaac came to the conclusion that the horse was without an owner.

"This here is quite a find," Isaac said, petting the horse. "You sure lucky I came this way before the Injuns could get a hold of ya."

It looked as though the owner had suddenly abandoned the horse—saddle and all. Carved on one of the saddle's leather straps was the name "Sanders."

Isaac thought about waiting a little while to see if Mr. Sanders would return, but the sun was starting to sink low, and Isaac didn't feel like waiting around for a man who had most likely been killed by Indians. He decided to ride the horse back to his encampment.

"Giddy up, boy," Isaac said.

The horse broke into a pleasant gallop, cutting through the grass.

Isaac already had a horse back at camp, but had left it there so as not to scare away the game. As he rode the horse, Isaac gave some thought to the matter. At first, he thought he might sell him. He would fetch a good price. But the longer Issac sat in the saddle, the more he wanted to keep the well-trained horse.

They made it to the Flathead River before long, where they would have to cross to make it to camp.

The horse responded to Isaac's commands and started walking down the bank into the rushing water.

Isaac suddenly thought he heard something from the bushes behind him through the roar of the water. He turned around, but saw nothing.

When he looked ahead, Isaac saw a man standing underneath one of the cottonwood trees across the river. He sighed. This must be the horse's owner. His good fortune had run out. He hoped the owner would understand the situation, and not take him for a horse thief.

As Isaac and the horse got closer, he could see the man better. He was most peculiar indeed. Dressed in an old wrinkled army uniform, the young man looked to be injured in some horrid manner. Dried blood stained the left side of his face, and his skin was a sickly shade of purple. He looked to be suffering from a severe infection.

Maybe the man wasn't the horse's owner at all. Maybe he just needed help, Isaac thought.

"You all right there, sonny?" Isaac yelled out over the rushing water. The man didn't respond.

Then, all of a sudden, the horse started rearing up and whinnying, spooked by the man on the bank.

"Easy there, boy!" Isaac yelled, but the animal couldn't be reasoned with. The horse bucked and sent Isaac flying into the river, where he landed headfirst into a pile of sharp rocks.

The last thing Isaac saw was the solider standing underneath the cottonwood, his expression unchanged, like nothing had happened.

***

Myles Sanders got the beast at the army fort for a steal. The old man selling him told Myles that the horse had been through many battles in the civil war, and even a few against the Indians. The horse had been retired from duty and was now being sold by the fort.

"I implore you, Mr. Sanders, be careful with this here horse," the old man said.

"Why? Is he violent?" Myles asked.

"No, but he ain't like other horses," the old man said. "He's got quite a history, and sometimes that history follows him around. You understand what I'm saying?"

Myles didn't know what the old man was talking about. All he knew was that a noble horse like this usually went for twice the price he was paying for it.

"Sure, sure," Myles said. Myles mounted the horse and nodded to the old man before trotting out of the fort and into the vast expanse of the plains.

The old man shook his head. He really shouldn't have sold the horse, given its history. The horse's original owner was a soldier in the Union Army who was killed while riding the stallion into battle. The soldier was struck by a bullet in his left temple and died instantly.

Since then, the horse had had multiple owners. And every last one of them had died in bizarre accidents while in the saddle.

The old man couldn't help feeling guilty watching Sanders ride off onto the plains.

Maybe things will change, the old man thought. Maybe this one will be different.

But something in his gut told him the haunted horse would kill again.

El Cucuy
de la Montaña

"I would not go that way if I were you," Victor said.

"This is the way, Vicky. I told you, I've been here before," Angel said, looking past the snow at the trail on the other side.

Stalling, Victor drank slowly from his water bottle. It was dusty and hot, even for July, on the steep path that led to the summit of Mt. Demonico. But it was not quite hot enough to melt this patch of snow.

Veronica, Victor's sister, had driven them to the trailhead and would pick them up after her shift ended.

"I'll see you two little twerps later," she said. "Don't let *El Cucuy de la Montaña* get you—and don't be late."

"Your sister is fine," Angel said after Veronica drove away, playing with his make-believe TV Zorro mustache. "But I don't care for her calling me no twerp and treating us like we was children with that trash talk about some Boogie Man of the Mountain. *Por favor*."

Victor smiled. He knew a lot of people believed those stories about *El Cucuy de la Montaña*. And he knew Angel wasn't one of those people.

"Man, it drops a long way if we slip," Victor said now, looking at the rocky precipice. It was hundreds of feet down, maybe even a thousand. "The scavengers are gonna have one sweet dead man's party on what's left of us."

"You always show up with that fear of yours. Everywhere we go," Angel said. "C'mon now, girl, this is the way."

Victor tried to stretch out the break by talking.

"You know my uncle said he saw *El Cucuy de la Montaña* up here once when he was a kid," Victor said. "He said it looked just like a regular man but then it started to breathe out fog or something."

"Or something is right," Angel said. "Your uncle's been breathing in too much loco weed.

"All right. Time to do this."

Victor's stomach sank, the chocolate and peanuts mixing with the now fear-flavored nougat.

The boys walked up to the edge of the snow again.

Suddenly someone walked up behind them.

"Man, don't sneak up like that," Angel said, losing his balance a little.

The tall man had long hair and a beard and carried a walking stick. It was the kind that always made the boys laugh, selling for 50 bucks in town when you could find plenty of sticks in the woods for free.

"There's a better way up over here," he said.

Then he smiled, turned around, and walked away. Squinting in the fierce sun, Angel and Victor watched him leave.

"These *menso* tourists," Angel said.

"Look," Victor said, seeing his chance. "I'm gonna go check it out. I'll call out if I find it."

Angel looked down at the snow and the drop without saying anything. He shook his head as Victor headed off in the direction of the hiker.

"Yeah, okay," he said. "Might as well check it out, if it's faster and all."

Victor exhaled deeply as he heard Angel walking behind him.

The boys followed the man at a distance to where the trail veered upwards. They both realized instantly that here was the real trail.

"Hey, don't you think it's strange that he wasn't carrying a pack or anything like that?" Angel said.

"Yeah, not even water," Victor said. "Man, I'd be thirsty."

"Maybe his people are at the top and they have his stuff."

The stranger was already far ahead of them. Right before he disappeared from view, Victor thought he could see the man's breath.

Must be cold up there, he thought.

The rest of the hike was easy. Soon the two boys threw up their arms on the summit in celebration as if they had conquered Everest.

"Wow, this is awesome!" Victor said.

Angel agreed, meeting his friend's fist with his own.

They stood there for a few moments, taking in the top-of-the-world feeling and all the sights. What they didn't see was the stranger. Somehow he wasn't at the top.

"Weird, man," Victor said. "Where would he go? It's like he just vanished."

"Yeah," Angel said. "Weirder than your mom's tamales."

Victor was about to start laughing. But then he saw the stranger suddenly appear behind Angel. The man's eyes burned red through the frosty fog that escaped from his mouth.

Before Victor could warn his friend, the man picked Angel by the shoulders and threw him off the side of the mountain.

"¡Esta es mi montaña!" the man said. "This is my mountain, fools!"

As it came toward Victor, *El Cucuy*—or whatever it was—seemed to create its own weather. The sun disappeared and the temperature dropped like one of those rocks trailing behind poor Angel.

Victor started running down the path as fast as he could.

It felt more and more like November with every freezing step he took. The rocks under his feet were beginning to feel slippery, but he knew he couldn't afford to slow down. That thing was probably coming after him.

As he rounded a switchback, Victor saw the creature out of the corner of his eye. It was covered in snow and ice. Victor screamed.

"*Dios, por favor*," he said. "Help me."

A moment later he lost his balance and fell, hitting his head on a rock. Everything went black.

When Victor came to, it was dark. The sun had gone down and it was freezing. Angel was lying next to him.

"Angel?" Victor whispered, shaking his friend. "Angel."

Angel was cold and stiff.

He must be dead, Victor thought.

An otherworldly cold closed in all around. Suddenly, it was the dead of winter. Victor began to shake uncontrollably. When he looked down, he saw that he was completely encased in ice. He struggled to move, but all he could do was shiver.

Before his eyeballs froze over, Victor saw *El Cucuy de la Montaña* coming toward him.

"I will feed on him first," it growled, staring at Angel with those demon-red eyes. "And then I will come for you, *menso*. And then I will come for you…"

AAAH!

Pond People

On humid hot days, when the puddles of sweat would pool up on his upper lip and run down in streams on the sides of his face, Peyton and his friends Wendell and Morgan would go to Drawdy Pond and cool off. The pond was about half an hour's walk from their neighborhood, and being that they didn't have cars, it was one of the few places they could go without having to ask their parents for a ride.

"Sho is a hot one," Peyton would say.

"Sho is," Wendell would say.

"Dern right," Morgan would say.

The pond wasn't that big, but what it lacked in width, it made up for in depth. The pond was so deep, in fact, that people said you could easily hide a body down there, and it wouldn't ever see the light of day. People said this had happened, back when a serial killer named Smiling Jack came through the town a few decades earlier. They said he killed people and hid the dismembered body parts at the bottom of the pond, wrapping them in plastic bags weighed down with bricks to keep them from floating to the top.

Sometimes, kids would say that you could feel the fingertips of the murdered victims tickling your feet while you were swimming.

This was probably one of the reasons why nobody else was ever at Drawdy Pond. Or, maybe it was the fact that a power plant was not too far away. A lot of people thought the place was polluted.

But Peyton, Wendell, and Morgan didn't believe any of those stories about the murder victims or the pollution. All they knew was that the pond was a sweet place to spend the long, hot summer.

One afternoon Wendell was swimming at the far end.

"Ah, Smiling Jack's got me!" he yelled as the other two boys laughed. "He's grabbing my feet!"

The sun was going down, and it was just about time to get back home.

"Time for supper," Morgan said, getting out and pulling his shoes on at the pond's bank.

"I'm downright starved," Peyton said, swimming toward the shore. "And it's getting dark."

Wendell wasn't too far behind.

"Ah! Smiling Jack has my foot!" Wendell yelled again. "I just felt him brush against my leg!"

Peyton laughed again, but was beginning to tire of Wendell's jokes. Peyton just kept swimming and was soon close to the bank.

"C'mon, Wendell," Morgan shouted. "Let's go!"

But there was no answer, just a lot of splashing, and neither of the boys could see Wendell in the water.

"Wendell, where are you?" Peyton yelled.

Again, there was no answer. Peyton changed direction and started swimming back toward where Wendell had been. Maybe he had gotten entangled in some pond weeds.

"He's pullin' our leg again," Morgan said from the bank. "I'm dern sick of his shenanigans. I'm goin' home."

Morgan started down the trail, but before he could get even a few feet, he heard Peyton scream. A bloodcurdling, high-pitched wail.

"Oh, my God! It's Wendell's leg! It's Wendell's leg floating here next to me! Smilin' Jack got a hold of Wendell!" Peyton screamed, swimming like a madman for shore. "Morgan, help mmm—"

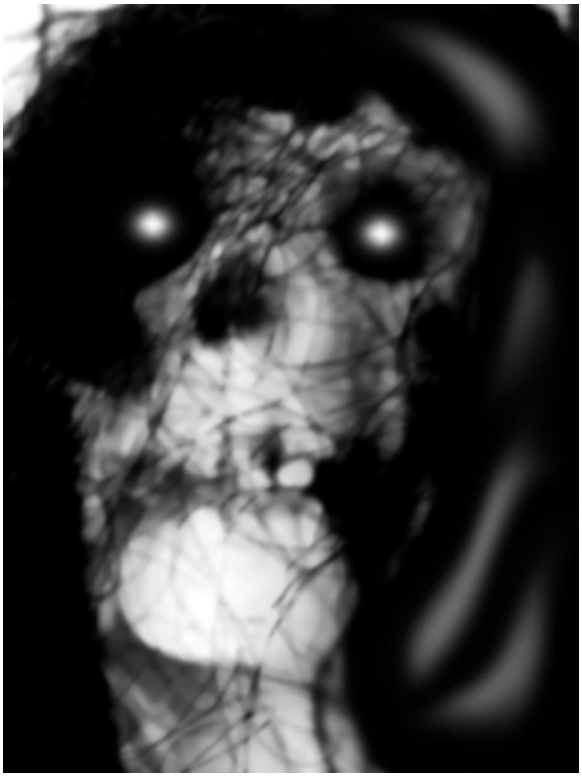
There were stifled gurgling sounds and a splashing of water. Morgan couldn't see anything in the darkness. He called out to Peyton and Wendell from shore, but nobody answered. Morgan could hear a lot of movement in the water.

Morgan ran all the way home.

***

Peyton, Wendell, and Morgan didn't know that just a few weeks earlier, the power plant had started preparations to build a new facility and had temporarily redirected a nearby stream into Drawdy Pond.

The particular stream was a favorite hangout for alligators.



Zombies are Us

George sat on the curb next to his friend Mike.

"Man, this town sure has changed," he said, shaking his head and rubbing his scruffy chin. "You just didn't use to see things like that."

They watched a zombie walk by on the other side of the street. His clothes were torn and his face had a lot of black rot on it. He had the usual slow, zombie limp that went with the usual slow, zombie mind.

"Yeah," Mike said, spitting into the street over his knees. "The town just ain't no good anymore."

"Remember all those pretty girls we'd chase on the weekends?" George said, smiling.

"Oh, boy, do I," Mike said. "And remember those chocolate ice cream sundaes that Donavan's used to make up?"

"Man. Those were good days," George said. "This here used to be a good town."

Suddenly the zombie caught the two friends in his vision and started heading over, in that usual slow-witted zombie kind of way.

"Ah, shoot," George said, getting up and clapping his hands together to get the sidewalk dust off. "I guess we're in for a fight. Ready?"

"Oh, I guess so," Mike said, yawning. He stood up and stretched. "Let's do it."

The fight lasted two minutes. The zombie didn't have a chance and lay dead, again, in the street.

"These zombies are such losers," Mike said, cracking his knuckles. "I mean, c'mon. This isn't even fun anymore."

George shook his head.

"I agree, pardner."

The two friends walked down the street as the sun fell out of the sky.

"How many of those zombies do you think we've killed since they invaded our town?" Mike asked.

"I dunno," George said. "At least a few thousand I'd say."

"That's 'cause they keep coming back to life. And it doesn't matter if we shoot 'em in the head or take them down with our fists. They always come back. We've probably killed the same ten zombies over and over and over again."

They walked some more.

"Yeah, it'd be good if we came up with a solution to kill them once and for all."

The two men got their minds thinking and then got to work. There was an old medical lab at the edge of town that nobody used anymore. It had all sorts of ancient equipment, books, and potions.

"When was the last time someone was in here?" Mike said.

"I dunno," George said. "But it's all ours. Now all we gotta do is try and figure out a cure for those monsters."

They worked day and night and day and night, reading the books and mixing chemicals. Finally, they were sure they had their antidote.

They went back out into town and killed another zombie and dragged it into the lab. They chained it up to a contraption that looked perfect for such things.

"This oughta do it," Mike said, holding up the beaker.

A crimson liquid swished around in the glass.

"Yep," George said. "I think we did it. Now we just gotta wait for Zomboman here to come back to life so he can take a nice, long drink."

"Yep," said Mike. "Might as well make ourselves comfortable."

They went to the corner and sat in old, large cushioned chairs.

"Man, if we aren't spending our days killing zombies, what will we do?" George said.

They thought for a moment.

"Hmm, didn't think about that," Mike said. "Come to think of it, this town was long dead before these zombies got here."

George sighed.

"Yep. Remember when the movie houses closed up on account of the economy? That kinda sucked."

"Yep. And remember when we lost our jobs?"

"Yep. And remember when the guy came and took my car because I had no money for the car payment?"

The two men got quiet. Then George came up with a new plan.

"I'm pretty sure that this here potion we created will be good for a little while," he said.

"Yep," Mike agreed. "Maybe we should cure the zombies another day."

"What about our friend there?" George asked, looking back. The zombie was still out of it, but his arms had started twitching.

"Best release him. He's part of our town now."

They unchained him, but the zombie was still mostly dead.

"Guess we'll see him out there," Mike said.

"Guess so," George said.

The two friends headed back outside.

They're Coming For You 4
Scary Stories that SCREAM
to be Read… Forthwith

O. Penn-Coughin

Copyright © 2011 O. Penn-Coughin

You Come Too Publishing

They're Coming For You 4
Scary
Stories
that
SCREAM
to be
Read
...Forthwith
O. Penn-Coughin

Introduction

The stories in this collection are meant to be read in the quiet horror of your mind or as read alouds. Some include instructions **[like this]**.

If anyone needs reminding, this book is not to be taken seriously. It's all in good fun.

O. Penn-Coughin

Van Full of Clowns

"Clowns!" the shouts rang out. "Run! The clowns are coming!"

Some said the van was white. Others said it was black.

But the stories agreed on one point: evil clowns were on the loose, looking to do who knows what. Up to no good, you could bet your best Carl Yastrzemski card on that.

The sightings first began in the winter of '81.

By early spring, every kid with any sense was spooked out of his mind. Man, even most of the senseless ones were jumpy.

Descriptions were vague. The ones who had been lucky enough to get away had a hard time saying exactly what the clowns looked like.

Were the clowns *real* or just evil doers in circus drag? Was there just one van or a whole fleet of 'em? Questions, rumors, facts, and fear bled together and poured into our dreams.

No matter how much the teacher said so-and-so had moved away, we knew the truth: the clowns had gotten another one. A van full of clowns was seen at the corner of 3rd and Dawson. In the parking lot of Morningwood Park. In front of the school.

The clowns had chased little Jimmy O'Brien down his block. That's why he fell and cracked his skull on the icy sidewalk that day in April. I don't know for a fact if that's how it happened. All I can tell you is Jimmy was never the same after that.

Some of the older kids would joke about it.

"Run! The Clowns are coming!" they'd scream at the younger kids.

"They'll get you and blow you up like a balloon."

"Yeah, they'll twist you into a balloon animal till you explode."

Sometimes they would inflate their empty lunch bags and sneak up behind someone and pop them.

[Clap hands loudly.]

"Clowns got another one!" they would shout.

More than one kid needed to change his underwear after that. They'd run to the office, crying, trying to hold in what had already leaked out.

"Run! The Clowns are coming! Ha, ha, ha, haaa!"

But even the older kids were scared, I think.

The cops said there was nothing to worry about. Just another case of mass hysteria.

Maybe the whole thing was made up by parents trying to get their children to make it home on time, to listen, to behave. The usual stuff. Maybe it was just another variation on the old boogey man stories. Fooled again. Could be.

But I think it was real.

I never actually saw the clowns myself, and I can't prove it, but I know they got me, I mean Mikey, my best friend.

One day walking home from school he saw an old white van pull up in front of his house. Someone got out and ran inside. Mikey was too far away to tell who it was. The van took off down the street.

When Mikey walked in, he found his stepfather. He came out of the bathroom, breathing hard.

"Hey, sport," he said.

His hair was sweaty and pasted to his forehead. He had a few traces of what looked to be white makeup on his face.

Mikey must have gone pale then.

"What's wrong, sport?"

Mikey looked down.

His stepfather was still wearing the big floppy red shoes.

He could tell that Mikey had seen them.

"I'm sorry you had to find out about this, Mikey," he said, coming toward him. "You're a good boy. I'm real sorry."

The shoes closed in. Closer and closer they came.
No one ever saw Mikey again.
Until now…
[Hum some circus music.]
AAAH!

Lazy Bones

He never had much energy when he was alive.
Now that he was dead…
[Yawn and stretch.]
Forget about it.

Chindi

"That old woman is half-blind," Blake said. "You distract her and I'll take that cigar box where she keeps her money."

The old wrinkled woman was sitting behind a blanket covered with turquoise and silver jewelry. Russell walked up to her.

"*Ya'at'eeh*, grandmother," he said. "How's business?"

"Today has been a good day," she said.

Blake came around behind her and picked up the cigar box. Some of the coins inside clinked together.

The old woman didn't seem to hear.

"*Hágoónee'*," Russell said, walking back to the car. "Goodbye."

Blake got behind the wheel and hit the gas, sending dirt and gravel flying.

"Candy from a baby, bro," he said, throwing the box on the seat between them.

A few miles up the highway they turned off on to a dirt road. Blake parked the car behind a large boulder.

"Let's go over there and see how we did," he said pointing to an old hogan.

"All right," Russell said.

They walked over the slickrock and soon reached the structure. It appeared to be abandoned.

Blake went inside. Russell hesitated for a moment and then followed.

The small hogan was filled with furniture and personal belongings as if someone still lived there—except that a thick layer of dust and cobwebs covered everything.

"Why is all this stuff still here?" Blake said.

"The owner probably died here," Russell said. "My people believe the *chindi*, the dead person's ghost, still haunts the place where someone dies."

"Your people believe a lot of weird stuff," Blake said.

"I suppose so," Russell said.

Blake opened the cigar box. He emptied the contents on the bed and started counting.

"Nine dollars and 42 cents," he said and shook his head. "We're so rich."

He smashed the cigar box against the wall. A large black spider scurried into a hole.

"Well, here's your share after gas money," Blake sighed, handing Russell three wrinkled dollar bills.

"Let's get out of here."

A warm gust of wind slammed the door shut behind them. A raven flew by casting its shadow on Blake's face.

"Man, it's hot," he said.

The air baked and sizzled over the rocks. In the distance a dust devil had formed. The two teens stood and stared at it as it grew and moved in their direction.

"I've never seen one last this long," Russell said. "It's a big one too."

The large tornado-looking counterclockwise swirl of dirt and sand was now almost on top of them.

"I need a big soda," Blake said, turning to leave. "Let's go."

"No," Russell suddenly said in a shaky voice. "It can't be."

"What, dog?" Blake said.

"In the dust devil," Russell whispered. "*Chindi*."

Blake didn't see anything. He turned and saw that his friend's face had gone pale.

"It's just sand, white man," Blake said. "There ain't no ghost in there."

"*Chindi!*" Russell said. "Don't you see it? Don't you see it?"

He started running.

"Take the money. I don't want it. Take it! Take—"

The dust devil now passed through Blake. Before he had to close his sandblasted eyes, he thought he saw Russell jump off the edge of the canyon.

A few minutes later, still rubbing his eyes, Blake walked over and looked down.

Hundreds of feet below, on a bloodstained rock, lay Russell's smashed and broken body. He was dead.

Blake stumbled back away from the edge.

***

Blake died less than a year later. He wasted away. The doctors were never able to find out what was wrong with him. In the end, he was nothing more than skin and bones. And then dust.

Bloody World

The eye in the blender was looking back at me. And then I realized I was the one in the blender looking out at the whir… at the whir… at the whir… at the *whirl*… at the *whirl*… at the *whirl*… going by… going by… going *bye*…

The Return of El Cuco

A new family had moved into the little house on the corner.
The first night in the house the little girl heard a noise. It was coming from the wall behind her bed.
"Help me, please," a tiny voice whispered. "*El Cuco* has trapped me in here."
The girl started crying and called to her parents.
"There's nothing, Elena," her mother said. "It's just a little hole in the wall."
But every night, the girl heard the same thing. The little voice called out for help.
"*El Cuco* has me trapped," it said. "Help me."
The father became tired of his daughter's tears.
"Basta de tonterías, Elena," he sighed. "Enough of this nonsense. I will sleep in here tomorrow night."
The next night the father slept on the floor of Elena's bedroom.
"Help me, please," a tiny voice whispered. "*El Cuco* has trapped me in here. Help me, please."
The father got up and put his ear to the hole.
"Help me…" he heard again.
"I told you, *papá*," Elena said. "I knew it wasn't *mi imaginación*."
The next morning the father got his tools and started ripping at the wall around the little hole.
He dropped to his knees when he saw it.
There, behind the wall, was the skeleton of a little boy.

What's He Building Up There?

The sound of the power saw cut through the night.

"What's he building up there?" Jerry said, looking out the window across the street and up at the house on the hill.

"He's not building anything," Frank said. "There's no hammering. Just the sawing."

Jerry couldn't remember when it had started, but it seemed to have been going on for weeks. And Frank was right. There was never any hammer sounds. All that sawing and no hammering. It was beyond strange.

"Then what's he sawing up there?" Jerry said. "And don't you suppose he could be using glue to hold things together?"

Their mom called up from downstairs.

"It's time for bed, boys."

"Good night, mom," Jerry and Frank said.

"I'm gonna find out," Frank whispered from his bed across the room. "Tomorrow night I'm sneaking up there."

Jerry didn't say anything. He started shaking under the covers.

"You comin' with?" Frank asked.

"Yeah, I'm in," Jerry said, hoping his brother couldn't hear the fear in his voice.

The next night, after the sun went down, the boys rode their bikes up the hill. They set them up against a tree by the end of the road and started walking through the woods. The house was dark, but there was a light coming from the garage.

It was quiet. Strangely quiet.

The door creaked a little when Frank pushed it open. He stuck his head in.

"C'mon," he whispered. "No one's here."

The two boys walked in.

There were piles of wood everywhere. But then they saw what the man had been building. Coffins. Coffins of all sizes lined the walls.

As they got closer, Jerry stumbled over a piece of wood and bumped into Frank.

"Shhh," Frank said. "Watch where you're going."

Jerry saw that there were words carved into some of the lids.

"Edgar Wilson," Frank read. "Hey, isn't that the kid at the end of our street?"

Jerry didn't answer. He was standing in front of another coffin a few feet away.

Linda Tomasi was carved on it.

"Look," Jerry finally said, pointing.

Frank came over.

"What the—"

Linda Tomasi was their mother's name!

There were two smaller coffins next to it.

"Jerry Tomasi," Jerry said, standing in front of his own coffin.

"Frank Toma—" Frank began and stopped when he smelled something.

"Hey, you were right," Frank said.

The strong smell of glue now filled the room.

"Let's get out of here," Jerry said.

Right before they could turn to leave, each boy felt a large, wet hand on his shoulder. The air now seemed to drip with glue. Then the light went out.

"I've been expecting you," a voice whispered in their ears.

No one heard their screams over the familiar sound of the power saw—*rrrrrr*—**AAAH!**

Shayton House

No one had ever spent an entire night in Shayton House without dying or going mad.

But that didn't stop people from trying.

They had been trying off and on since the house was built in 1864.

According to the legend, the original owner, Everett Shayton, had died during his first night in the house. The servants found him on the south lawn the next morning. He had either fallen or jumped from the roof.

At last count, more than 100 people had lost their minds and 23 had died in the house. Twenty-four including Shayton.

The most recent victim was a 14-year-old boy who broke into the house last October. To keep him company, the teen brought his pet parrot.

At first nothing happened. But shortly after midnight, a voice started calling from somewhere out in the night.

"I'm coming for you," it moaned soft and low.

A few minutes later the voice was closer.

"I'm coming for you," it said again.

It sounded like it was out in the front yard.

Suddenly, the boy's parrot spoke.

"You're not coming for me, caw," it said. "Not for me."

This was particularly unsettling for the boy because he had had the bird for four years and this was the first time it had said anything.

The voice called again. It now sounded like it was right outside the front door.

"I'm coming for you," it moaned.

"Not for me, caw," the parrot answered. "You're not coming for me."

"Shhh," the boy whispered. "The Ghost of Shayton will hear you."

"What do I care?" the parrot squawked loudly. "It's not coming for me, caw."

Equal parts angry and spooked, the boy ran upstairs and into one of the bedrooms.

"I'm coming for you," the voice said from the foot of the stairs.

"Not for me… what do I care?… he's in here, Shayton," the parrot said. "Caw, caw, caw."

The boy thought about choking the parrot, but before he could do anything he heard the Ghost of Shayton open the bedroom door.

"I'm coming for you," it said again.

Leaving the bird on a chair, the boy hid in the closet.

"He's in there, in there, in there," he heard the parrot saying from a few feet away. "Make me your servant, Shayton, caw, caw, caw."

"You were right—I wasn't coming for you," the voice said. "But no one likes a stool pigeon."

The boy heard a terrible ruckus and then all was quiet.

In the morning they found the boy, still in the closet, laughing. His mouth, chin, and chest were covered in blood and feathers.

He had gone insane and appeared to have eaten the parrot.

"It was Shayton!" he screamed over and over. "He'll tell you. Go ask Shayton!"

He carried on like this and denied it vehemently, but a stool analysis later revealed the remains of the bird.

Shayton House had claimed two more victims.

[This story works better if you can pull a feather out of your mouth at the end.]

Me Zombie

Me zombie. That what they call me. Me not know what it mean. Me not know what make me how me be or why me speak like me do. Me know me hungry. For brains. *Braaaains.* Your *braaaains*… **AAAH!**

Townes the Clown

Seems like another lifetime ago. This was way back in the days when I had the world by the ba—sorry, I suppose there might be young children present—all right, tail then. I was the king of the rodeo circuit. I had yet to meet a bull that was my equal. I was at the top of my game. My mind was razor sharp and my body was harder than Bulgarian grammar. I had it so goin' on.

I was 23. And the best was yet to come.

And then it all went to hell.

I was too young to be a has been. But that's exactly what I became. It all happened in an instant. And it all started with a clown.

I had never given clowns a second thought. Had no feelings for 'em either way. Never was scared of 'em as a child neither.

But that was before I met *him*.

"Hey, cowboys," the boss said one day. "I want you to meet our new rodeo clown. This here's Townes. Townes the Clown."

He shook my hand and looked into my eyes and I knew at that moment that nothing would ever be the same again. Don't ask me how. I just knew.

He was a big man. Not fat, just big. Tall. Wide shoulders. Big chested.

And the fact that he was so big made the next thing stand out even more and appear even more freakish. You see, Townes the Clown had a small, little baby head. Now, I know babies have big heads. For babies. But you stick the biggest baby head on a big ol' growns man and you've got the makin' of one true freak. And that's how he was. Here he was bigger 'n a football lineman, and with this little bitty head sitting way up high. Little eyes, little ears, little nose, little mouth to match. Freakish.

Without his makeup, he was just plain odd looking. But with it, man, he became someone else. Someone, *something* evil. Pure evil. Even the meanest, craziest bull backed away slowly when it saw that little, evil head.

His makeup was simple. He painted his face white with black circles around the eyes. Then he put a little dab of red on the tip of that little nose. And smeared a lot of it sloppily on his little lips. He topped it off with a little kid's straw hat. And that was it. *Scary city.*

The weird thing—one of 'em anyway—was that no one else seemed to see it. The evil that lived in those eyes, I mean. Everyone took a shine to Townes the Clown. And he became a crowd favorite. I couldn't understand why I was the only one who could see him for what he was.

Right after I met him, I started being thrown by every bull I rode. I was flyin' through the air left and right. I couldn't hold on for the life of me.

Going down in the dirt was new to me. I didn't know how to break my falls, had never learned. I was in shock and did a poor job of protecting myself from the bulls. But every time I went down, *he* was there to rescue me. On more than one occasion, I'm pretty sure he saved my life. Always sending me a creepy, little smile from that creepy, little head.

"Be careful now," he would say in a high-pitched child's voice. "Wouldn't want anything to happen to yooooou."

I tried all fashion of good luck charms and down home remedies, but it was no use. Besides I knew luck had nothing to do with it. It had everything to do with Townes the Clown.

Things went on like this for I don't know how long. Until one day I decided I would do something about it. I didn't know why I hadn't thought of it sooner.

I snuck into his motel room before he got there. I waited under the bed. I heard him come in. I waited quietly. *So quietly.* When he started snoring, I waited some more. My hands were steady. My breathing was even. My heartbeat was slow and measured.

I finally slid out from under the bed and stood up slowly. *So slowly.* After watching him sleep for a while, I went to work.

I took what I had come for. I took my revenge.

Later I stood at the bridge under a full moon, breathing in the freedom. I was free of Townes the Clown. Free. Forever.

I opened up the plastic bag and emptied it over the side. I watched it splash down and bob and float downriver. I stood there for a long time, till it disappeared, bound for Mexico I suppose.

I woke up the next morning and felt like I hadn't felt in a long time. I felt the old confidence return. I had my life back again.

But when I got to the rodeo, Townes was there. He was there as usual with his little head.

Except that I had taken it. I looked down and could still see the blood on my hands to prove it. It had not been a dream. I swear it. Nor had I imagined it. But it was definitely back. Somehow, he had sewed it back on. I could see the sloppy stitching around the neck.

Townes just winked at me and smiled his creepy, little smile from that creepy, little head.

I knew then that I would never be free of him. I knew too that he wouldn't ever let me die. He was having too much fun.

'Course, I tried other things through the years. I killed him on several occasions. But he always came back. I tried runnin' away. But he always found me and brought me back.

Through it all he always kept smiling.

He's smiling still.

[Now smile a creepy, little smile at your audience. After a while scream if you think it's called for.]

4:55

It was raining hard and John Calhoun was driving fast. He rounded a corner and saw the young woman at the last second. He slammed on the brakes. She looked up and smiled. He didn't know her but there was something about that smile. Something so familiar.

"I'm sorry," he called out through the downpour. "Can I give you a lift?"

"Sure," she said. "I'm headed down to Sears."

"My name's John," he said after she got in. "John Calhoun."

"Nice to meet you, John Calhoun. I'm Sarah."

She smiled again.

They drove in silence through the rain.

When they were almost there, John Calhoun looked over at the young woman and noticed that she was beginning to disappear—right there in her seat. He stopped the car.

"Hey, wait a minute," he said. "What's going on here?"

And then it hit him. It was just like one of those stories.

"You're a ghost, right?" he said suddenly. "You're *dead*."

"Well, yes," she said right before completely fading away. "But so are you."

John Calhoun didn't understand any of what was happening. He ran his hand through his hair and then looked at his watch.

4:55. The date was stuck on February 14, 1991.

"I'm gonna have to get this thing fixed," he said.

And then slowly, through a fog, he started remembering. He started remembering what had happened on February 14, 1991.

It was raining hard and he was driving fast. He rounded a corner and saw the young woman at the last second. He slammed on the brakes. She looked up and smiled. He didn't know her but there was something about that smile. Something so familiar.

He slammed on the brakes. Too late. Then he swerved. Again too late. She flew through the air. John Calhoun lost control on the wet pavement. The car slammed into a tree and caught on fire.

He looked down at his watch. It read 4:55.

All these years later, it still read 4:55.

And then he smelled something and looked down. His arm was on fire. The flames soon engulfed the car. John Calhoun's world turned red and black. And then everything disappeared.

For another year.

Hold the Pepperoni:
The Prequel

"Look at those pigs," the first demon said.

"Yeah, what about 'em?" the second demon said.

"I bet we could really sow some havoc as pigs," the first one said.

"Oh, man," the third demon said. "We could sneak up to people as pigs and they would be thinking 'look at that stupid pig' or 'what a cute little piggy' or some such and the next thing they *don't* know, we've possessed them."

"Right," the first demon said. "Let's go for it."

"That little black one is mine," the second one said.

"I've got that big fella over there," said the third.

"All right," the first said. "I'll take the sow with that large litter of young'uns."

"I believe the term is *farrow*," the second said.

"Now that's really interesting," said the first demon. "As usual, I don't know what in blazes you're talking about, but I'm sure it's really interesting."

A few minutes later, three of the pigs began acting most peculiar.

The other pigs got spooked and stampeded away from them toward the hills.

"What got into them?" the third pig said.

"Beats me," the little black one said and chuckled.

"Let's stay focused," the momma pig said. "I believe we could have some serious fun with that shepherd over there."

"I wonder what those three pigs are up to," the sheepherder said putting down his staff. "Looks like they're heading this way."

Backyard Man

They buried the old man in the family plot at the edge of the large backyard.

"Ashes to ashes and all that jazz," Bob said, handing the gravedigger some crumpled bills.

That night Bob looked out the window toward the grave.

"There's something moving out there," he said to the cat.

The cat arched its back and hissed at the air.

There was a moaning and there was a groaning coming from out in the night. Lightning flashed and thunder crashed. The cat arched its back like an illegal U-turn and something scratched at the door.

Bob gripped his glass tight.

The scratching turned into a knock.

"At least it's human," Bob whispered to the ice in his glass, trying to sound as cool as the jazz coming from the sax player on his stereo. But Bob wasn't cool. He was up pretty tight. Another knock and the glass shattered in Bob's hand from the death grip he had on it.

The cat flew out through the closed window into the night trailing glass and hair and blood.

There was another knock. Louder. And then a voice.

"Bob, it's me," it said. "It's your old grandpa."

Bob got real quiet, pretending no one was home.

"It's cold in the ground, Bob," the voice said. "Let me in so I can warm up by the fire."

Bob said nothing.

"Bob?"

The knocking started again.

I guess I should let him in, Bob thought after a while.

He walked over and opened the door.

There in the shadows stood the old man. He looked the same as he did when he was alive.

But he wasn't the same.

"I'm cold," the old man said, stepping inside. "And I'm hungry."

He licked his lips and looked at Bob with bulging, ravenous eyes.

The next morning the old man buried what was left of Bob.

Then, thinking better of it, he dug him up and made soup.

Out of the Blue

The old graveyard had been a peaceful place for as long as any of the residents could remember. But all that changed when someone decided to build the new elementary school right next to it.

First came the bulldozers and the earthmovers. Then came the carpenters and the cement pourers. Then came the teachers and the children.

This was turning out to be one screwed up final resting place. What with bells ringing and all that screaming and cursing. And that was just the adults.

Some of the cemetery's oldest ghosts had been there since the days of the Oregon Trail, and they weren't at all happy about these recent developments.

"We survived untold river crossings, all kind of disease, Indians, and accidents," Dale Matthews said. "We've come too far to end up like this."

"Know what you mean, pardner," Tom Reynolds said. "Hard to get any sleep 'round here these days."

"Maybe it's time to pack up the boys again," Dale said.

"Maybe soes," Tom said. "Maybe soes."

One Friday afternoon in late April, out of the blue a cloud of dust blew across the school playground. What sounded like animals and calls of "Yaw!" came from its direction, but no one saw anything.

Suddenly a teacher screamed and fell to the ground. The children yelled and scattered in all directions.

By the time help arrived, the woman was dead. Her tongue, thick and blue, hung out of her mouth. Her eyes bulged with eternal terror. Her chest appeared to have been crushed. It looked like she had been run over by something awfully heavy. Investigators later found some odd looking ruts in the mud a few feet from her body. It almost looked like they had been made by wagon wheels.

Yaw!

Gee!

Haw!

[Make moaning ox sounds.]

Yaw!

Gee!

Haw!

[Make moaning ox sounds.]

Yaw!

Gee!

AAAH!

There Was Nothing There

There was nothing there.

A boy stood on a grave. He screamed for no reason.

There was nothing there. There wasn't even a grave. There wasn't even a boy. And there wasn't even a story.

There was nothing there. Nothing there. No need to scream. No one to scream. No need to write a story. No one to write a story. No one.

No need.

No story.

No… **AAAH!**

A Difference of Opinion

Soccer practice had ended. Four players sat in the grass behind one of the goals.

"CR9 is a woman," Tim said.

"Well, Messi's a moody little dwarf with a dead stump for a right leg," Nuno shot back.

"Wayne Rooney is the man," Clive said.

"Get real," Tim said. "Wayne Rooney? Wayne Rooney is a butt-faced Nani's boy."

"All three are actually quite similar," Poindexter said. "Cristiano Ronaldo, Lionel Messi, and Wayne Rooney play great for their club teams but have had disappointing careers for their countries."

"Take a stand, why don't you, you turd," Clive said.

"All right," Poindexter said. "If I had to choose one striker—and that's what you're talking about here because you can't seriously compare players in different positions—I would base it on combined performance for club and country and—"

"Just pick someone already before we all get as old as Sir Alex Freakin' Ferguson," Tim said.

"Okay, David Villa or Diego Forlán," Poindexter said. "Or a 2002-2006 Ronaldinho. Although the two current players that are most valuable to their teams, in my opinion, are Xavi and Wesley Sneijder."

"You're really making my head hurt," Tim said. "Plus nobody said nothing about going back in time or—what's that called?—*history*."

"You know though," Nuno said. "It's hard to argue with him."

"Okay," Tim said. "Let's not argue with him then. Let's just kick his know-it-all little—"

"You know, speaking of history," Poindexter said. "Did you know the first soccer balls were made out of human heads?"

Tim glared at him and started to get up.

Knowing he was in for it, Poindexter took off running toward the far end of the deserted field. The three boys began chasing after him.

"Come back here, you little turd!" Clive called. "You know you've got it coming to you."

Poindexter wasn't a very good soccer player, but he was fast. The pursuers gave up by the time they reached the center circle. To be on the safe side, Poindexter didn't stop until he got behind the other goal.

Suddenly a man dressed in a three-piece suit stepped out of the bushes and walked up to him. Poindexter stared up at the man. His suit was covered in dry, caked mud. His face was a pale purple color. There was a sutured scar circling his head.

Then as the three boys looked on in horror, the man grabbed Poindexter's head and ripped it off his shoulders!

A great geyser of blood shot from his neck into the air. Poindexter's body stumbled around for a few seconds before collapsing.

"I can't believe my eyes," Tim said, breathing hard. "That guy just tore off Poindexter's head!"

"Let's call the cops," Nuno said turning in the direction of his soccer bag. "I'll get my phone."

The other two followed him but then they all stopped.

Other dead-looking people started stumbling toward them from all directions. The three boys tried to escape but it was no use. They too ended up like Poindexter.

"Me like Ronaldo," one of the zombies said a few minutes later with food in her mouth. "He pretty."

"Clint Dempsey, he more pretty," another said getting mad. "Hollow eyes make my knee wobble and go all lucy goosey."

"Ronal-din-ho," the three-piece-suited zombie said, dribbling Nuno's head slowly in a large circle. "Dinho, he still the best."

Sins of a Saturday Afternoon

"Can you confess something you haven't done yet, father?" the voice on the other side of the partition said.

"Let's stick with what you *have* done," Father O'Brien sighed. "Plus you have free will, my son. You don't have to do whatever it is you haven't done yet."

"I don't mean to tell you your business," the voice said. "But I think you're wrong."

"What do you mean?" the priest said.

Saturday confession always brought in the loons.

"Well, padre, in the first place it'll be too late to confess it later," the voice said, sounding different. "And second, you're wrong about free—"

"Wait, my son. What do you mean it will be too late to confess it later?"

"It'll be too late," the voice hissed, "because you'll be *dead*."

Father O'Brien suddenly felt the entire confessional shake. Then he heard the wood splintering. He didn't even have time to say a pra—AAAAH!!!

What's the Matter, Sweetie?

The room was entombed in darkness. A total absence of light sucked the life out of the world. A blackness darker than death. And then something began to glow. Ever so slowly. Faintly. But growing in intensity with each passing second.

Details came into focus. Features revealed themselves one by one.

It was a face.

And it became clear that that glow, almost neon vomit green, still faint, was coming from inside the head itself. The corners of the mouth turned upward in a twisted, macabre imitation of a smile. The eyes burned bright now. A hellish brightness that could only come from one place. It came closer and closer and closer and…

Aaah! Aaaaah!

Rupert woke up to the sounds of his own screams.

He ran down the hall, crying and gasping for breath. He was drowning in his own fear. *Breathe*, he told himself. *Breathe!*

So hideous. So horrible. And yet… there was something vaguely and hauntingly familiar about it. *Must breathe.*

Twelve now. Breathe. Too old for this…

He burst through his mother's bedroom door.

"What's the matter, sweetie?" his mother whispered, running her fingers through his hair. "Did you have a nightmare?"

She hadn't called him *sweetie* in years.

Rupert could only gasp and shiver in her arms.

"You know what grand dad used to tell me when I had a bad dream?"

"Wha-wha-what?" Rupert whimpered.

"He would say that nightmares are one of the best things in the world because you wake up and you see that they're not real. That everything's fine."

She kissed Rupert softly on the forehead.

She was right, he thought. *I'm being a baby. Everything is fine.*

He started to calm down.

Suddenly the room became cold. Icy cold. He could see his breath.

Rupert began shivering again and looked down at his shaking hands. They were green—neon vomit green.

The fear returning, he looked up at his mom's face.

It was glowing. The corners of her mouth turned upward in a twisted, macabre imitation of a smile. Her eyes burned bright. Green and bright. It was that face, the same face he had seen in the nightmare.

The face of—

Rupert broke free and stumbled out of the room.

"What's the matter, sweetie?" a voice called from behind and then laughed.

It no longer sounded like his mother.

"What's the matter, sweetie?"

Running down the dark hall, Rupert looked back over his shoulder. There was nothing there.

There was nothing there.

There was nothing there.

But there was something, something green and unspeakably evil, waiting for him in—**AAAH!**

Broken

The TV was their lives. One day it broke. They dug a hole in the backyard. And jumped in.

Bad Memory

Something woke George in the middle of the night.

Something was scratching at the window.

He got up slowly and stumbled toward it, almost tripping over the empty whiskey bottle on the floor.

It was his wife.

"Sarah, what are you doing out there at this time of night?" he said. "Did you forget your key?"

"I've come back, George," she said, sounding a little strange.

George wondered if he was dreaming. What was Sarah doing out there? Starting to wake up, George realized that their bedroom was on the second story and that there was no ledge outside the window. How could Sarah be stan—

"I've come back for you, George," she said, the skin falling off her face. "Now we can always be together."

George suddenly remembered that he had buried Sarah that morning. *After he had killed her*.

"I don't understand how I got there," she said. "But I was in the ground. It was dark and cold. But I found my way back, George."

She smiled as best she could through her smashed and sunken face.

"I came back for you, George."

George screamed and *ran* out the window. And fell on the hard brick patio below.

"Let's go home, George," Sarah said next to his dead body. "Let's go home."

Trail Thing

It came to be known that the trail leading into the Cherokee village was haunted. A thing would steal and eat the liver of travelers upon the path.

The village lived in fear. The chief called the great council together. There was talking and talking. Nothing was decided.

"I will walk this trail," Fears No Man finally said. "I am not afraid. I will bring back the monster's head."

The next day Fears No Man was walking upon the trail. He saw an old woman up in the distance.

"You should not be on this road, grandmother," the warrior said when he caught up to her. "There is a monster about."

"So I have heard," the old woman said. "But now that you are here, I am unafraid."

Fears No Man and the old woman walked the trail for a time. The shadows grew.

The old woman began to hum a song.

"What is that you sing, grandmother?" the warrior asked. "I have never heard that song."

"It is my own," the old woman said. "I will teach it to you."

"When my belly growls I do not quiver," she sang. *"When my belly growls I feed it liver. When my belly growls I feed it liver."*

Fears No Man stopped and turned to face the old woman.

Her face changed and became hard as a rock. Then she began to laugh through black, rotten teeth.

"When my belly growls I feed it liver."

Afraid for the first time in his life, Fears No Man staggered back.

"It's *you*," he said, his voice shaky. "You are the liver stealer that haunts this trail."

The old woman did not answer. She just kept laughing.

The warrior quickly shot the thing full of arrows. But they all bounced off as if her skin was made of stone.

The old woman kept laughing.

Forgetting his promise, Fears No Man took off running down the trail.

But he soon became tired. Very tired. He started walking and then shuffling and after a time was too weak to even crawl. He sat down by the side of the trail with his back to a rock.

The liver witch might be just around the bend, coming after him, but Fears No Man was too tired to care. He just sat there. His eyes grew heavy.

A short time later, he heard someone coming down the trail in the opposite direction.

"The Great Spirit has sent help," Fears No Man sighed.

It was a young woman. When she came closer, the weary warrior could see that she was beautiful.

"Help me," he whispered. "We must hurry and leave this place."

"What is the hurry?" the young woman said.

As the setting sun shone upon her face, Fears No Man could now see that her mouth and chin were covered with blood.

"What has happened to you?" he asked.

The young woman smiled through black, rotten teeth.

At that moment Fears No Man suddenly understood why he had lost all his energy. He reached down and felt around. There was no blood, no slash across his midsection. But *it* was missing just the same.

"What have you done to *me*?" Fears No Man gasped, horror-struck.

The young woman began to sing.

"When my belly growls I do not quiver. When my belly growls I feed it liver. When my belly growls I feed it liver.

[If possible, grab someone's gut as you shout...]

"*Your* **LIV-AAAH!**"

Stone Lover

The lonely girl was too smart to believe that her Prince Charming would one day come and take her away. And even if such things happened, she knew it would never happen to her.

She needed to take things into her own hands. So one day she checked out a book of spells from the library.

She found the right one and followed the instructions.

"Give it a name and place its image in the circle of candles," the book read. "Close your eyes and repeat 'Eye of newt, horn of toad, unfathomable lyric of Stevie Nicks, bring him to me, bring him to me now.' Do this nine times."

The girl put the postcard of David she had brought back from Italy inside the circle of candles.

She closed her eyes and began chanting.

"Eye of newt, horn of toad, unfathomable lyric of Stevie Nicks, bring him to me, bring him to me now. Eye of newt, horn of toad, unfathomable lyric of Stevie Nicks, bring him to me, bring him to me now…"

A moment after she had finished, there was a loud knock at the door.

The girl got up and looked out the peephole. She couldn't believe it.

"It can't be," she whispered. "It worked. It worked."

She threw open the door and standing there in front of her was David. The statue had come to life. It had come to life!

His white skin had a marble paleness that lit up the room. He smiled and waited.

"Come in," the girl said.

David stepped inside and gently took her hand. Tears flew from her eyes as he crushed the bones in her fingers. He leaned in to kiss her. He knocked out some of her bottom teeth with his tongue.

She reached for the book of spells with her good hand.

"Antidote," she mumbled, drooling teeth and blood. "Antidote. Must… find… antidote…"

As she flipped desperately through the book, David closed in for a hug.

Squeamish Teacher

“I don’t think children this age should hear vampire stories,” the teacher said.
“I think you’re right,” the author said. “Guess we won’t tell them what happened to you.”
“What do you me—” the teacher began to say but never finished.
The author interrupted him. *With his fangs.*

Tumama is Ugly

Who is the scariest clown in the world?

It's impossible to measure such things. It's a very personal thing. Everyone's got their favorite.

That being said, it would be hard to find a scarier clown than Tumama.

Tumama was so scary that she had been fired from countless circuses and carnivals for being so ugly. She was so scary looking that people of all ages would just start running away at the mere sight of her shadow or the mention of her name.

Then one day when Tumama was about to give up being a clown, she got a job at a special circus for the blind. People couldn't see her, so there was no problem. Everyone loved Tumama. For the first time in her life, Tumama was happy.

But then something happened. A doctor came to the circus and checked everyone's vision.

"Tumama needs glasses," the doctor said to Tumama. "Just wait till you see what you've been missing."

Tumama picked out some big red frames.

The following week, her glasses arrived.

Wow! This was amazing! The doctor was right. Everything was so clear and in focus.

And then Tumama looked in the mirror.

She let out a terrible scream.

Tumama had never seen herself before. Not so clearly and so in focus. For the first and last time she saw what everyone else saw.

Tumama dropped dead on the spot.

Look Away

The old high school at the edge of town was a disaster. The teachers were fine, and the kids were okay, but the two story-building itself was a mess. It was ancient, with plenty of peeling paint and wobbly floors. And because times were hard in the little Alabama town, there was never any money to fix anything.

Since they had shut down the coal mine a few years back, a lot of people packed up and went to the city. So there weren't so many students in the school anymore. In fact, the entire upstairs was closed off and used for storage. No one was allowed to go up there anymore.

One day, during history, the ceiling started squeaking and everyone looked up. It sounded like someone was walking up there, pacing back and forth, back and forth.

"Relax, students," Mrs. DuBois told the class. "Probably just the janitor getting something."

Everyone went back to work.

But every day for the next week, during their lessons on the Civil War, strange noises kept coming from upstairs. There was walking and pounding and things falling. Sometimes there was a dragging sound across the length of the ceiling. Even though Mrs. DuBois had called the office to report what was going on, the secretary always called back and told her that the janitor found nothing up there.

"It's the ghost of Corporal Smith!" shouted Bobby McGraw one day.

The class laughed nervously, but soon Bobby's idea took hold. The kids started believing that it was the ghost of the long dead corporal, who had died in a Civil War battle not far from where the school was built.

Bobby told Shane that he was going upstairs to confront the ghost and invited him along.

"We'll sneak up after school, when the school's cleared out. See what's going on," Bobby said.

At the end of day, the boys ran up the stairs. It was pitch black and they had no flashlights. All Shane could do was follow Bobby's whisper.

"See anything?" Shane asked.

"Not yet," Bobby said.

Suddenly, both boys saw the small light at the end of the long hall. They walked toward it.

"What the heck? It's a campfire," Bobby whispered. "And smells like one too. And listen. Do you hear all those voices?"

Shane did hear the voices and did smell the fire. And suddenly he saw a large silhouette heading right towards them.

"Let's get outta here," Bobby whispered. But his mouth was so dry, Shane couldn't even hear any of his words.

Then a man's voice screamed at them.

"Looky what we got here!" he said. "Reinforcements! Two young men, all ready to enlist and fight the good fight, help us win this war! Welcome to the Confederate Army, fellas!"

The man laughed a terrible laugh that pounded in the boys' brain. They tried to run, but a group of men held them down and started dragging them over to the fire. In the next moment they were out in a foggy field, with terrible gunfire all around and the smell of death thick in their nostrils.

Back in town, everybody was talking about the disappearance of Bobby McGraw and Shane McElroy from school the previous week. Police had searched the school, woods, and the entire town with no luck. But some students reported that they had seen the two catching a train headed for the big city. That's what the boys always talked about. The police concluded that they must have just left.

"Kind of weird they'd just pick up and leave like that," Mrs. DuBois said in class one day. "Those boys' families have been in this county for over one hundred fifty years. Why, some of their relatives fought in the Civil War."

"Oh, that's what it is, relatives," Wade Jenkins said. "Freaked me out last night. I was looking at that picture of the Confederate Army in our history book. Two of those fellas look exactly like Bobby and Shane. But it must have been their kin."

‘Em

“What were you thinking out there?” the coach screamed.
Donavan just tilted his head to the side, like a dog trying to understand human speech. Then he smiled.
“Brains,” he said.
“What?” the coach shouted.
“Brains,” Donavan repeated and shuffled closer.
“Exactly,” the coach said, shaking his head. “Use ‘em or lose ‘em.”
Then Donavan bit off a big chunk of the coach’s head.
“Or eat ‘emmm.”

17 Miles

The phone rang. It was Jim's father.

"I've skidded off the road," he said. "I'm about 17 miles—"

The line went dead.

Jim called back several times but there was no answer.

And then he woke up. The dream seemed so real. It took a few moments for it to dawn on Jim that his father had died of cancer four years earlier.

Jim lay in bed, remembering his father and trying to make some sense of the dream. Did it mean something? Was his father trying to tell him something? Could it be some kind of warning?

Jim wasn't the superstitious kind, but since he didn't remember his dreams very often, he couldn't help but think there was a hidden meaning to them.

He couldn't get back to sleep and spent the whole day thinking about the dream.

"Skidded off the road… 17 miles… 17 miles…" he kept repeating.

Jim never found out what the dream meant.

He was grilling some steaks on the barbecue and…

He suddenly woke up.

"Man, I had another one of those nightmares," he said.

"The one where you're still alive?" his dad asked.

"Yeah," Jim shuddered. *"Scary."*

Evil

It was a dark and stormy night. Very dark. And very stormy. There was something outside. Something evil. No, not *something* evil. It was evil itself. Just sitting there. Waiting in the rain, getting all wet.

"The hell with this," the evil said in a ghastly voice dripping with rainwater and death. "I'm going inside."

It took a step toward the house.

The family ran out the backdoor. The house would have left too, if only it could. A moment later the evil blew right in through the locked and frightened door. It filled the house from the basement to the attic and back down again. The house trembled something awful.

After a while the evil toweled off, got bored, and left.

It was last seen heading this way.

AAAH!

Home Early

Brenda Brown came home early.

She baked a cherry pie for her husband, Bob.

Since Bob usually beat Brenda home, he was surprised to see her.

"Got off early, huh?" he said.

"Yeah," Brenda said. "I baked your favorite."

Bob could smell the pie, fresh out of the oven, even before he saw it sitting on the counter.

"Works for me," he said and smiled.

He saw that the answering machine was blinking. He began to play back the messages.

"Mr. Brown, this is Principal Lawrence at Sunset Elementary," the voice said. "I'm calling because Brenda never—"

Just then the doorbell rang.

Bob opened the door.

It was the police.

"Mr. Brown?" one of the officers said. "I'm afraid I have some bad news for you."

"What is it?" Bob said.

"I'm sorry," the other officer said. "But your wife was killed at the train station this morning. She somehow fell from the platform and into the path of an oncoming train."

"There must be a mistake," Bob said. "My wife's right here."

Bob Brown searched and searched the house but found no trace of Brenda—except for the cherry pie, still hot and steaming.

Her body had been down at the morgue all day.

Pumpkins on the Porch

The pumpkins sat on the porch. The old man and the old woman sat on the porch too. It was warm for late October. Downright hot.

The pumpkins were beginning to rot in the heat. The old couple was beginning to smell bad too.

By early November the weather had cooled. But by then it was too late. The pumpkins had long since turned black and moldy. And the old man and old woman had turned orange. Long creases covered their faces. Stems grew from their heads. They just sat there, not moving, and watched the dead leaves blow down the street through their triangle eyes. They smiled their jagged smiles and spit out their seeds and waited for what would happen next.

He began screaming. Nothing could save him.
AAAH!
AAAAH!!
AAAAAH!!!

The Head

The toilet started gurgling.

Great big bubbles rose to the surface. For a moment everything was quiet. Then an eyeball silently pressed up against the small opening at the bottom. And then the entire porcelain structure began to shake furiously.

Something was making its way up.

After more shaking, a small bloody head pushed its way up, up, up, and finally free. It floated at the top. Then it opened its mouth and started singing soft and low.

"Nobody knows the trouble I've seen."

The sound of its voice was almost beautiful.

Almost.

A hand reached out and flushed the toilet.

Rodeo Clowns

Waylon and Big Ed were rodeo clowns.

Big Ed was a short fella with a short temper. On accounts of being so little and all, I reckon Big Ed felt he had to be tougher n' meaner than everyone else.

One day he decides for no good reason that he didn't like Waylon. Waylon was a good-natured, gangly cowpoke who towered about two feet over the top of Big Ed's head. But that didn't matter.

"What you lookin' at, big dumb clown?" Big Ed says to Waylon one day.

I don't think Waylon was even looking at him. But that didn't matter. From that moment on, he went after Waylon. At first it was just name callin' and such.

But one day, Big Ed went too far.

Right before the rodeo was set to start, he put something in Waylon's milk. He thought it would be funny to see Waylon stagger around like he was drunk. Especially since Waylon didn't drink.

When Waylon got out there, he was a real mess, wobbly as a newborn calf and trippin' all over hisself.

The crowd was really into it, thinkin' it was part of his act. But some of the older clowns knew it was dangerous. One of them even tried to go out and bring Waylon in, but Big Ed held him back.

"Get back, old timer," Big Ed said. "Don't try to spoil my fun now."

Next thing we know, a bull is charging Waylon.

He never had a chance.

There's nothing sadder 'n a clown funeral. I tell you what. 'Cept maybe a clown funeral in the rain.

The authorities never found any real evidence that Big Ed had done nothing wrong, so Waylon's death went into the books as an accident.

I don't think Big Ed ever felt guilty about it neithers. Wasn't made that way. But he did begin acting kind of peculiar. Started talking to hisself. He would look up and say things like, "Now I know you're not real, so just git!" like he was talkin' to someone.

Then one day about a year after, it was, it's Big Ed's turn to go distract the bull and suddenly his eyes 'bout pop out of his head and he starts pointin' and screamin', "No, Waylon, No! No, Waylon, No!"

There was no one there. But Big Ed saw something just the same. And the bull saw and smelled something too. Fear. He grunted and charged.

Big Ed never even tried to get out of the way. He just stood there looking up and screaming.

"No, Waylon, No! No, Waylon, No!"

The bull's left horn ripped into Big Ed's chest. He lifted him high up in the air. Big Ed didn't even seem to care. He just kept screaming, "No, Waylon, No!"

Big Ed died long before reachin' the hospital.

Things got even stranger when it was discovered that some vandals had desecrated Waylon's grave that night. The soil was all turned over. And then the cemetery caretaker noticed that down in the hole the coffin was all splintered to pieces and the body was gone. What those no good varmints would want the body of a dead clown for I could not say.

All I can tell you is that Waylon was never seen again.

Of course, some of the folks who were there at the rodeo that night think that isn't exactly true.

Some even say you can still hear Big Ed's screams if you listen carefully on nights when the moon is full and the crickets are all chirped out and the midnight train has rolled over them thar hills and the—**AAAH!**

Hold the Pepperoni:
The Prequel, Part Two

"Are you pigs lost?" the shepherd said looking down. "Don't you have a house to buil—"

He suddenly felt something strange blow through him. He was rocked again a second time. And a third.

The three pigs, their eyes now bulging with confusion and terror, ran snorting and grunting and oinking in great distress toward the rest of the herd.

Inside the shepherd an argument broke out.

"What in Hades are you two doing in here?" the first demon said.

"I'm tired of you always acting like you're the boss of me," the second said.

"Yeah," the third said. "Anyway, like you said, this could be some 'serious fun' times three."

"I suppose," the first one said.

"Darn right," said the second. "You make this guy dance while I have him speak in a language he doesn't know."

"What should I do?" the third one said.

"How 'bout you make his eyes spin and go all white?" the first demon said. "That's always a crowd pleaser."

Menu

Tom was lost out in the woods of Northern Canada. It was getting dark and cold and he didn't know where he was or how to get back to his car.

The shadows closed in all around. He started to get really worried. And then he smelled something.

It smelled wonderful. Some sort of meat cooking.

Soon his nose led him to an old cabin. There was a light on in the window.

Tom decided to ask for help. He knocked on the door.

An old man answered.

"Howdy, young feller," the man said. "Name's Dan. Friends call me Ol' Dan on account I'm no spring chicken and on account my name's Dan."

"Hi," Tom said. "I'm Tom. I wonder if you could help me. I'm afraid I'm lost."

"Oh, no," Ol' Dan said. "You've come to the right place. And just at the right time too. You're just in time for supper."

Tom stepped inside the small cabin and sat at the table.

"It'll just be a minute now," Ol' Dan said as he scratched something onto a little chalkboard. "I tend to forget things if I don't write 'em down. I was updatin' tomorrow's menu."

"This is delicious," Tom said after the first spoonful.

The meat was tender, like it had been stewing all day in the large pot.

"What is this, deer meat?" Tom asked.

You might say that," Ol' Dan said and winked.

Just then Tom noticed that there was something among the potatoes, the carrots, the lentils, and the meat. It was looking up at him. It looked like a—

"DEAR GOD, that's a human eyeball!" Tom shouted.

"See what I mean?" Ol' Dan said. "I call this here *dear* meat on account of folks always carryin' on about 'Dear me' or 'oh, my dear' or, as in your case, 'Dear God.'"

Tom dropped his spoon.

"Better dig in, boy," the old man said. "On account of this being your last meal and all."

Tom sat perfectly still for a moment. Then he got up and ran toward the door. But Ol' Dan stuck out a foot, sending Tom flying across the floor. He landed near the large stew pot hanging in the fireplace.

Right before something sharp sliced into the side of his head, Tom managed to read what was written on the little chalkboard: *Biscuits with Homemade Tom Turkey Gravy.*

Bandoneón

The call came in on the shortwave radio and confirmed their worst fear: the storm that had lasted for six days would now maroon them here for much longer.

Dr. Mary St. Clair and Dr. Paul St. Clair had been packed and all ready to go. But the husband and wife science team would be going nowhere. It was now too dangerous for a plane to come for them until the spring. They would be spending the entire winter in Antarctica.

Just last week the planes had come and gone, flying tons of gear and hundreds of people back to civilization. Back to the sun.

"Well, at least we've got plenty of food and fuel," Paul said. "And the flat screen and all those DVDs should help pass some of the time."

"Too bad our books and my sheet music were already shipped out," Mary said. "But this might give me a chance to write my own tangos."

Paul had bought her a small hand-held accordion called a *bandoneón* in Argentina on their last stop before flying down to their South Pole home. He thought learning how to play a new instrument would help to fill the long Antarctic hours. Mary had become a pretty good player in the five months they had been at the ice station.

"Maybe you can teach me how to dance," Paul said, trying to sound optimistic. "Plus maybe I'll write that novel I'm always talking about."

At first the couple made the best of the situation. They watched movies, Mary played her music, and Paul wrote.

But in under a month the TV broke and Paul developed writer's block.

Mary kept playing though. She had even written a tango she called "Pablo's Peace."

Paul liked it at first and was touched that Mary would name her first composition in his honor.

But as the weeks went by, Mary became more and more obsessed with the song. Soon it was all she would play.

Through the endless dark days and dark nights that bled into one another, *Pablo's Peace* began to wear on Paul.

"Mary, could you please play something else?" he would ask and then beg and then scream. "Please, Mary. For the love of God. *Please*."

But the answer was always the same.

"I'm almost finished with it, dear. It'll be worth it."

Mary stopped cooking and bathing and sleeping. Her entire existence revolved around *Pablo's Peace*.

"For the love of God, Mary. Please stop, please," Paul would say. "Please."

"I'm almost finished with it, dear," she would answer. "It'll be worth it."

***

When the other scientists returned to the ice station in the spring they found Paul first.

He had killed himself with an axe.

Then they found Mary. In the freezer. She had been hacked to pieces and neatly wrapped and stored.

They also found a note.

I know you won't understand, but I had to do it. She drove me mad. With that song. That infernal song. The funny thing is that I can hear it still. Even though I made her stop yesterday. Or was it last week? It doesn't matter. I made her stop. That's the point. Or if you're going to nitpick, all right, the axe made her stop. But I helped. And when we were through with dear, dear Mary—the axe and I—we made that bandoneón stop. Oh, we made it stop. That damned bandoneón will never play another note again. We saw to that. God will understand. He knows about such things.

Dr. Paul St. Clair

"Man, that poor bastard really went nuts out here," the detective called in to investigate the case said. "But I guess music will get on your nerves that way I suppose."

“To my way of thinking that’s a scientific fact,” the ice station manager said. “And you could almost understand where he was coming from, except for one small detail.”

“What’s that?” the detective said.

“Along with the rest of their personal belongings, that accordion he writes about was flown out on the last plane that left here back in March—*six months ago*.”

There Was Something
at the Top of the Stairs

There was something at the top of the stairs.
There was something at the top of the stairs.
There was something at the top of the…
AAAH!

A Knock at the Door

There was a knock at the door.

Old Ned peeked out through the window.

"It's Death," he told Old Jed. "Don't answer it."

Old Jed nodded.

There was another knock.

"You can't hide from me forever, ya *bassturds*," Death said. "I'll be back."

Several years went by.

Then one day Old Ned got real sick.

"I think this is it," he said to Old Jed.

There was a knock at the door.

"I think you're right," Old Jed said.

"Don't answer it just in case," Old Ned said.

"Got ya," Old Jed said.

But it wasn't Old Jed anymore. When Old Ned looked up at Old Jed's face, he saw a skull.

Old Ned suddenly remembered that Old Jed had died last year.

"You found me at last," Old Ned said to Death. "Well at least I'll get to see Old Jed again at the graveyard."

"I wouldn't count on it, ya *bassturd*," Death said.

There was another knock at the door.

"Who's that?" Old Ned said with his last dying breath.

"It's Red the Undertaker," Death said. "He's here to drive your body to the morgue. But he'll fail to negotiate a sharp turn and go off a cliff. There shouldn't be enough left of either one of ya to bury."

The Possibilities

"Man, these little punks are so freakin' lucky," Eddie said shaking his head. "Can you imagine if our elementary school had been next to a cemetery?"

"Yeah, I guess that would be kinda cool," Max said. "But being in middle school is still better."

"What's wrong with you, man?" Eddie said. "Can't you see the possibilities?"

"Guess not," Max said.

The two boys were quiet again as they waited for their younger sisters. They stared at the new school and the old graveyard just on the other side of the playground.

The bell rang and kids came pouring out the front doors.

"You meet me back here tonight and I'll show you the possibilities," Eddie said. "And bring a shovel."

"A shovel?" Max said. "That sounds uncool."

"Just do it, female," Eddie said.

"All right," Max sighed. "What time?"

"Let's say 9:00," Eddie said.

Max bit his lip and nodded slowly.

***

They had been digging in the dark for 20 minutes.

"Why are we doing this again?" Max said, breathing hard.

"Because it's here, man," Eddie said. "We're just looking for a chance to relive what we missed out on."

"That doesn't even make any sen—" Max didn't finish.

Suddenly dirt had started flying up from under their feet.

Then a gray, bony hand reached up and grabbed Eddie by the ankle.

"I like your thinking, boy," the corpse said, standing up. "Especially the part about re-*living*."

Max pulled himself out of the grave and ran off screaming.

"Help me, man!" Eddie called after him in vain. "Help!"

The *thing* still held on tight to him.

"I'm sure you don't mind if I borrow your body for a while," it said in a gurgling voice. "Don't wait up for me."

Eddie dropped dead into the hole. Then *he* got up and started—

AAAH!

Old Fears

Rachel had always been afraid to flush the toilet.

At first her parents thought it was cute. Later her sister would take turns making fun of her and being disgusted.

When she was younger, Rachel couldn't wrap her mind around it or put it into words. She just knew there was something scary, lurking there in deep down in the water.

But as she got older, Rachel began to spend more and more time thinking about what it was that frightened her so. And the more she thought about it, the more her fear seemed to vanish.

By the time she was 15, her phobia had become something that belonged to her past. A funny, dark secret and nothing more.

But then one day Rachel was visiting a friend and had to use the bathroom. Suddenly the room was filled with the smell of terror. Then she heard a voice coming from somewhere below her.

"I'm the thing," it said. "The thing you feared all those years. You were right to be afraid."

Rachel felt herself being pulled down, down, down beneath the water, beneath the light. Beneath, beneath, beneath…

Parasight

Strange looking little creatures had begun to take over the aquarium.

Besides their odd shaped heads, they seemed harmless enough. But to be on the safe side, Rosa decided to give the tank a thorough cleaning. Wouldn't want some parasite to wipe out her pets. She safely removed the tropical fish and got down to it.

As she was finishing, water splashed in her eye.

It immediately began to burn.

Rosa stumbled to the bathroom and rinsed the eye with fresh water. The eye was sore and red and swollen.

She quickly finished putting the aquarium back together and went to lie down. At some point she fell asleep.

When Rosa woke up, her eye felt better. But as she got up she almost lost her balance and fell down. Half the room looked freakishly large. She looked in the mirror and saw that her left eye was no longer red or swollen. In fact it almost seemed smaller than its original size. And it had changed color or rather lost color and looked faded, almost transparent.

Rosa felt terribly thirty, as if she had taken a nap in the Sahara. She went to the kitchen and poured herself a large glass of water and stopped. She suddenly reached for the salt container and poured half of it in her glass. Then she gulped it down.

"Ahhh," she said. "That's better."

She went to look at the aquarium.

"Por el amor de Dios," Rosa said.

The creatures were still there.

As she took a closer look, Rosa got dizzy. Her head felt strange. There was something wrong with her eyes. Her left eye had become like some sort of microscope. Everything she saw out of it was huge. The little things in the fish tank were as big as she was.

Rosa staggered back to the bathroom.

She screamed when she looked in the mirror. The entire left side of her face was now transparent!

She screamed again and fainted.

When she regained consciousness, she felt better. She wasn't dizzy anymore. Everything seemed to be the right size—even the giant shrimp head looking back at her from the mirror.

The Fax Machine

The fax machine beeped.
Something was coming in.
The machine started to make a terrible noise. The jammed paper caught on fire. Smoke poured out.
And yet something was coming in.
Something—not paper, not flat—dropped onto the desk.
It was a hairy hand.
It scurried behind the computer monitor and waited.
Then the phone rang.

Teddy Bear

Elsa's dad worked in the customer service department of a large store. Sometimes he got to bring home things that had been returned and could not be resold. Sometimes the items were broken—her dad was good at fixing things. Other times the things had slight imperfections but still worked.

"This teddy bear's got a bit of a problem," he said one day. "He doesn't seem to have a face. I thought maybe you could sew one on for it."

"All right," Elsa said. "I'll see what I can do."

She took the large bear into her room.

That night Elsa had a series of terrible nightmares. Each one was more horrifying than the last. She finally woke up screaming.

Except that she couldn't hear herself scream. She couldn't see anything in the dark, so she reached over and clumsily knocked the lamp over onto the floor.

She then reached up to her face with thumbless, mitten-like hands. She couldn't feel any skin. Just matted stuffed animal fur. She didn't have any features either. No eyes, no mouth, no nose, no ears!

Elsa tried to scream again. And again. And again.

It was no use. She couldn't hear a thing. The shouts were all trapped inside her head. And she couldn't see.

She couldn't see that there was a new doll in the room, where the Teddy Bear had been.

It looked just like Elsa. Except it wasn't Elsa. And it wasn't a doll.

Nine

The old van parked across from the school. Nine clowns got out.
The old van parked across from the school. Nine clowns got out.
The old van parked across from the school. Nine clowns got out.
[Encourage audience to chant along.]
The old van parked across from the school. Nine clowns got out.
The old van parked across from the school. Nine clowns got out.
The old van parked across from the school. Nine clowns got out.
[Ask listeners to close their eyes now and to keep chanting. Don't worry if some don't. They'll get theirs.]
The old van parked across from the school. Nine clowns got out.
The old van parked across from the school. Nine clowns got out.
The old van parked across from the school. Nine clowns got… **AAAH!**

You're It (No, Really)

"Dad," Jeanne yelled. "Mr. Fluff Butt caught another one!"

There it was, curled up and dead, at the top of the stairs leading down to the garage.

Jeanne's dad got some paper towels and picked it up.

A moment later Mr. Fluff Butt came shooting up the steps. He bounced off the wall and out of sight.

"Wow, look at those eyes," the dad said, holding up the dead mouse. "They're so red."

"That's gross!" she said.

It had to be the creepiest mouse Jeanne had ever seen. But the next thing that happened was even creepier.

The mouse suddenly started moving and its dead eyes came to life. It broke free and ran down the stairs.

"Looks like Mr. Fluff Butt needs a little work on his *coup de grâce* technique," Jeanne's dad said. "Oh, well, our brave hunter deserves an extra helping of wet food tonight anyway."

But Mr. Fluff Butt didn't show up for dinner that night. Or the night after that. Jeanne searched everywhere for the fat gray cat but couldn't find him.

"What if he got hit by a car or something?" she said, breaking down on the third night.

"Don't you worry," her mom said, sounding worried. "He'll turn up."

Sure enough, the next morning Jeanne woke up and found Mr. Fluff Butt at the foot of her bed.

"Mr. Fluff Butt!" she yelled, hugging him tightly. "Where have you been, kitty?"

The cat purred loudly as Jeanne kissed his soft and fluffy head.

Then, out of nowhere, came the flash of Mr. Fluff Butt's claws.

He dug into Jeanne's face. Mr. Fluff Butt held on to her cheek like some sort of possessed rodeo rider. She finally managed to throw the crazed cat across the bedroom.

He raised his back and hissed.

Through her tears, Jeanne could see that Mr. Fluff Butt's eyes were different. They weren't green anymore. They had turned a sickly shade of red. She had seen those eyes somewhere before.

Jeanne mom's heard the screams and came running. She disinfected the nasty looking scratch and tried to make some sense of what had happened.

"Cats will be cats," she said, shaking her head.

Jeanne had trouble sleeping that night. The scratch hurt and she had nightmares. About the mouse with the red eyes. About Mr. Fluff Butt. About blood.

In the morning she almost screamed when she looked at her face in the mirror. The area around the scratch was swollen and pink. "Geez, Frankenstein," her dad said when he saw her. "That doesn't look so good."

He was trying to be funny, but he sounded worried. He placed a hand on Jeanne's forehead.

"I think we better take you in," he said.

On the way to the hospital, Jeanne felt parts of her head grow numb. When they walked in, she couldn't help but notice the look of terror on the nurse's face. She led Jeanne and her parents to an exam room.

"The doctor will be right in," she said, looking away. "I'll make sure you get top priority."

Jeanne's parents looked at each other. They couldn't hide the concern in their eyes.

At some point, everything went black.

When Jeanne came to, she felt different.

Everything was different now.

"Oh, my God," Jeanne's mom cried. "Look at her eyes?"

Her parents stood over her, their faces frozen in fear.

When the doctor came in, all she could see was the pale pulsing pink flesh. A hunger burned in her stomach. She grabbed his arm and dug in. He let out a shriek and tried to pull away.

But Jeanne was too strong.

Going My Way

It felt like he had been going around in circles for a long time. Everything looked the same. Trees. Trees of all sizes. Trees. Trees in every direction.

The hike had started out well enough. It was beautiful in the forest. And then Virgil had decided to go off trail. To test his navigation skills. His map skills.

It turned out he didn't have any.

At least that's how he felt now. He had tried in vain to find the trail again. That was hours ago.

And then a sound. A grunt? A growl? He turned around and saw it. A bear. Sniffing the air. Heading toward him. Virgil dropped the map and compass and took off running. His daypack bouncing off his back, he ran and ran and ran. His chest had to be one more breath away from exploding, but he ran some more.

He didn't see the tree snag that tore into his shin. Virgil went flying. Crying out in pain, he looked behind him. Nothing but trees.

He wondered if there ever had been a bear. Maybe he had imagined it.

He crawled over to a tree trunk and sat up against it. He looked at his leg. It didn't seem to be broken, but it hurt terribly.

Still breathing hard, Virgil reached for his water bottle. That's when he saw it.

A few feet away, propped up against a nearby tree, was a body.

It looked to be a teenager, about his age. It looked like he had been out here for a long time. The rotting flesh was dropping from its face. Bones were poking through in places. Hollow eyes looking through him.

As Virgil stared on in horror, he noticed how much the boy looked like him.

He had the same haircut. The same clothes. The same baseball cap. The same Sunridge Middle School water bottle. Except for the horrid decomposition, it was like looking in the mirror.

And then it hit him like a chainsaw. The boy didn't just look like him. *It was him.*

Virgil was seeing himself. He was dead. He had died out here. He had gotten lost and died. His ghost must have been roaming these woods for days and weeks. Maybe months. And now it had come back to its body.

He was dead!

Virgil hung his head to his chest and cried.

And then the corpse began to speak.

"You will end up like me one day," it said. "But not yet."

When Virgil looked up, the boy's bony index finger was pointing.

"Go that way."

Virgil wiped away his tears and stood up. He started walking. Somehow, his leg had stopped hurting, and he was now sure that he would find the trail and make it out all right.

When he turned around, the corpse was gone.

It's All Right, Jerry…
That's All Right, Mama

Jerry and Tom were riding their bikes in the deserted community of summer homes. It was early November and just about all the fair-weather residents were long gone.

The asphalt bike path wound in all directions through the large complex, which included an 18-hole golf course. They had it all to themselves. There were little signs every once in a while showing the way to "The Nature Center" or "The Marina" or "The Amphitheater" or some other place.

It was cold, cold enough to snow. But not today. The sky above the tall trees was clear.

"Let's go down to the river," Tom said, not waiting for Jerry to answer.

"It's all right with me," Jerry said, following close behind.

It was all the same to him. He was a city kid and it was fun just being out here in the forest with his cousin.

The ducks floated on the icy waters among the reeds. The boys got off their bikes and started skipping stones, trying to reach the far shore.

"Oh, good one!" Tom said. "Boy's got an arm on him."

In the distance a lone wolf or coyote howled.

"We better start getting back," Tom said. "The night comes fast out here in the forest, especially at this time of year."

"It's all right with me," Jerry said again. It was a line from an old movie his father liked to watch.

Jerry looked up from the water and noticed that the sun had gone down behind the trees across the way. They got on their bikes and rode.

They passed some places they had seen coming in. Jerry could see Tom's breath blowing behind him.

"Let's take this shortcut," Tom said.

"It's all right with me," Jerry said.

They kept peddling in the growing shadows.

After a while, Tom slowed down and then stopped.

"Wassup?" Jerry asked.

"This is real stupid right here, dog, but I think I'm lost," Tom said.

"That is stupid, man," Jerry said, slapping his cousin on the head and laughing. "But not as stupid as you sayin' 'dog' trying to sound all citi-fied or something. Plus, you live here."

"I know I live here," Tom said. "But we just moved here two weeks ago."

"C'mon, let's find the way," Jerry said.

They rode for several more minutes. It was dark now. Jerry had to focus hard to see where he was going.

"Can't you see anything that looks familiar?" he shouted.

"That's the problem," Tom said. "It all looks the same."

"It's all right with me," Jerry said, but he didn't mean it anymore. He didn't want to spend the night out here in the dark, chilly forest.

They peddled some more and then stopped at an intersection.

"Las Vegas, 50 feet," a sign read.

"This is nuts," Tom said. "I know this sign wasn't here before. Plus we're thousands of miles from Las Vegas, not 50 feet."

Just then they heard music playing.

Jerry recognized the song. It was an old one his dad sang sometimes.

"Ain't nothing but a hound dog…"

The boys walked their bikes and headed toward the music.

The forest opened into a large meadow. Bright lights and loud noises filled the air.

A nine-foot tall Elvis suddenly appeared in front of Tom.

"I'm in the mood for a peanut butter banana bacon sandwich," Elvis said. "But you'll have to do."

He then leaned over and bit off Tom's head.

Jerry started screaming.

Such Sweet Sorrow

Roland Bartholomew didn't exist. It wasn't so much that the 15-year-old was unpopular in school as that he went utterly unnoticed. He had no friends and no enemies. To teachers he was just another name on the roll sheet. He floated through his days as if he simply wasn't there.

The only thing that gave Roland's life meaning was art. He loved to study art history and he loved to paint. He spent most of his free time hanging out at art galleries and museums.

One rainy November day Roland was strolling through an exhibit of Victorian art at the Portland Art Museum. He was pretty much bored out of his mind. Roland wasn't big on the style of romantic realism represented in the majority of the paintings. He was more into edgier artists like Magritte, Picasso, Munch, and Chagall.

"This is way too sappy," he said under his breath.

But just as Roland was about to make a quick exit, something caught his eye.

It was a work entitled *Romeo and Juliet* painted in 1884 by a Sir Frank Dicksee. The two young lovers in the painting were kissing while Romeo sat atop a balcony. A flowery green vine wrapped its way up a nearby marble column. The dawn sky and the red terracotta rooftops of northern Italy could be seen in the background. But it was Juliet, in her long nightgown and downy beauty, who drew Roland's attention.

She stabbed at his chest like a knife and all his loneliness came bleeding out.

"She's so—" Roland whispered, fighting the lump in his throat, "*beautiful*."

His heart immediately ached for her. He was filled with a kind of longing he had never known before.

Roland began spending more and more time at the museum, standing dumbstruck in front of the painting. Minutes and hours and days went by like this. During non-museum hours, he read and reread *Romeo and Juliet* by William Shakespeare.

Then one day while he was standing there gazing at his true love, something strange happened. Something strange and amazing.

For a second, he found himself *in* the painting, in Romeo's shoes, kissing Juliet. Pressing her close to him, smelling her perfect skin, tasting her sweet lips.

At first Roland, knees still shaking, wasn't sure what had happened. He was just grateful for the joy he had experienced and that his imagination had grown so strong.

Over the coming weeks, this scene was repeated several more times. Each kiss was sweeter and lasted longer than the last.

Roland began to live for these all too brief moments of bliss. Unable to compete, the real world drifted away. Imaginary or not, for the first time in his life Roland was happy. But time was running out. The exhibit was set to move on to another museum in another city.

Roland wasn't sure what to do. Following Juliet around the world was not realistic. While he might be able to sneak off to San Francisco—the exhibit's next stop—a few times, what would happen when she traveled to Asia or went back home to England? Stealing the painting wasn't in the cards either. This was real life and he was no Thomas Crown.

At first, he bought a poster of the painting and took it home, hoping to recreate the magic. He stared and stared, but it was no use. He couldn't duplicate the experience. It didn't work.

Next he tried to paint it himself. Since he had never painted something in this style, he held out little hope. But in the end he was surprised that it looked as good as it did. The background was almost a perfect reproduction of the original. But try as he might, Roland just couldn't capture Juliet's beauty and the tender passion of the kiss the way Dicksee had. And more importantly he couldn't transport himself inside his own painting the way he did with the one at the museum.

Then he had an idea.

Maybe if I concentrate hard enough I can stay in the painting not just for a few seconds, Roland thought*, but forever*.

On the last day before the exhibit was scheduled to move on to the next museum, Roland skipped school and spent the entire day in front of the painting. He pretended he was there on a field trip.

“The museum’s closing, son,” a security guard said after the sun had gone down.

“Farewell, farewell!” Roland whispered. “One kiss and I’ll descend.”

“It’s time to go,” the man said, walking up from behind and putting his hand on Roland’s shoulder.

A moment later the guard heard a girl screaming. It was a terrible, agonizing howl that shook the large room. The guard thought the sound had originated from the wall behind the painting. He took a few steps toward it.

“What was that?” he said.

When the security guard turned back around, Roland was gone.

***

Lost in the kiss, Roland suddenly felt something pull him from behind and he lost his balance. In an instant, he was falling back, head over heels, down toward the ground. The Verona sky above her, Juliet’s beautiful and haunted face was the last thing he saw. He heard her scream. In vain, his hand reached up for her. A moment later he hit the ground, breaking his neck.

Everything went black.

***

The next morning the museum was in full-blown pandemonium. One of the paintings, valued at several million dollars, had been stolen.

It was *Romeo and Juliet*.

The authorities were baffled. The security cameras hadn’t captured anything unusual. A teenage boy and a security guard were the last people seen near it. The only clear fact was that at some point during the night, the original had somehow been replaced with a blatant forgery.

But why would the thief or thieves bother to leave behind a fake that was so obviously different? While it was true that the new painting was quite similar to the original in most ways, it contained one glaring difference that could not go unnoticed: Romeo was missing. Juliet now stood on the balcony alone, looking down at something on the ground with an expression of grief-stricken horror.

Perhaps just as strange was the fact that tests later showed the oils and the canvas to be from the original period—*almost 130 years old*. And experts agreed that everything about the painting suggested that it was in fact the work of Frank Dicksee, who had been dead for more than 80 years.

The original was never found. And Roland Bartholomew was never seen again.

The Big Comeback

I had to come back.

I couldn't let her crime go unpunished.

I think that's why I *woke* up.

I woke up in the dark. It took a while for my senses to return. There didn't seem to be any oxygen in the small box. At first I began to panic. And then I realized I didn't need to breathe anymore. My lungs were just so much stuffing now. My heart was in pieces. A million pieces. She had seen to that. Good thing I didn't need it anymore either.

I began to push up on the lid. It took a long time, but I finally heard the wood crack. And then the dirt poured in. The dirt was easier to go through, but there was more of it. But I had time. Lots of time.

I made it to the surface as the sun was coming up. The caretaker screamed and ran off when he saw me.

I walked down the street. The few people out at that hour crossed to the opposite sidewalk when they saw me coming.

I walked and walked and walked. I stuck to alleys and side streets when possible. I stumbled and staggered and slowed near the end. Not from fatigue but from decay. But as the first star came out, I turned on to her street.

"I'm coming, Julia," I whispered.

What was left of my brain, my brain, my brain choked its grip around how she had told me she couldn't love me. She had laughed at me.

"Not if you were the last creep on earth," she had said.

That's when I began to die.

"Creep's coming, Julia," I hissed as a wobbled up her driveway.

I pushed the doorbell and my finger fell off.

She answered the door. Then took a step back.

I reached for her and keeled over.

She gasped and tried to scream but her heart had stopped.

She crumbled down on top of me.

"Who's creepy now?" I sighed, as I stroked her hair. "Who's creepy and dead like me?"

Doppel Mangler

Greer liked living out in the country. She hated those suburban developments closer to town with the houses built a few feet away from one another. Those houses only had views of other houses. Even though it was a 30-minute commute every morning and night to get to her job at the attorney's office, Greer didn't mind. At least at the end of the day, she had a view of trees and hills.

She was driving home from work one night. It was getting dark out on the country road, and Greer was driving fast. It had been a long day, and all she wanted to do was go home and curl up on the couch with a cup of tea and her cat, Mr. Bollers.

Suddenly, a car zoomed by, going toward town. Greer hadn't seen it coming, and the revving of its engine jarred her.

"That was mighty nerve-racking," she said out loud, her heart pounding in her chest.

A short time later, another car sped by, again coming out of nowhere. Greer caught the color and make. It was a green Honda Accord. Just like her car.

"Those crazy kids," she muttered. "I have a mind to report them to the police when I get home."

Greer kept driving.

A minute later, another green Accord came at her. But instead of some *crazy kid*, an old woman was behind the wheel.

Still another car came blowing past her a few seconds after that. It was the same make as all the previous cars.

This time, Greer was able to make out the license plate number as the car came toward her.

"WTF 75... 9. Wait a minute, that's mi—"

She never finished the thought.

They had to fish the car and Greer's lifeless body from a large pond below the road.

The driver of the Dodge she almost hit told police she had crossed the middle of the road and drifted into the oncoming lane just as he was passing.

"I was able to see her face clearly as she came at me," he said. "It's almost like she had been distracted by something on the road. Though what it was I could not say.

"We were the only two cars for miles and miles."

Something in the Snow

There was something in the snow. Something alive.

It caused the snow to move and clump together in strange formations like when the cat leaves something behind in the litter box.

They looked like badly made snowmen. Three arms here. Two heads there.

And then the *snowmen* began to move. They began to move toward the house.

Closer and closer they came. Closer and closer…

The Ferryman

Wesley Johnson stood on the shores of a dark river. He couldn't remember how he got there. He just felt tired. More tired than he had ever felt in his entire life.

He dropped down to his knees. He could see his face, illuminated by the moonlight, reflected in the water below. He looked pale and something seemed to be wrong with his head. When he reached up to touch it, his fingers made a squishing sound.

"That doesn't sound too good," Wesley said. "Funny how it doesn't hurt."

Just then, someone came up next to him.

"Hello, young man," an old woman said. "Do you have a coin I could borrow?"

"What?" Wesley said. "What do you need a coin for out here?"

"To pay the ferryman," she said. "I can't understand how I forgot to bring some money. I never leave home without it."

Wesley dug in his pocket and held out two shiny silver dollars. The old woman's trembling fingers felt ice cold.

"Thank you, young man," she said, taking one. She began to laugh and then started coughing, a gurgling sound coming from her chest.

"That cough doesn't sound good," Wesley said.

"I don't pay it no mind," she said. "Oh, look, there's our ride."

Wesley looked out onto the water and could barely make out a boat approaching through the dark.

"Have your coin ready," the old woman said.

The boatman wore a long black robe and the hood covered his face.

"All aboard," the ferryman said in a tired, ancient voice.

The old woman stepped in and handed over her dollar. Not sure what to do, Wesley followed her. He held out his coin. A hand poked out of the man's robe and took the coin. Wesley thought it strange that there was no skin on the hand, just bones.

"What the—" Wesley said.

He squinted in the darkness as the ferryman turned toward him. All there was under the hood was a grinning skull!

"I don't want to go!" Wesley suddenly screamed, trying to get off the boat.

"It's out of your hands now," the skeleton man said, pushing Wesley down.

The boat began crossing the river. Wesley kept screaming…

***

At the Eternal Rest Mortuary, two men bent over a body.

"Looks like this one needs to be cremated," the older one said, looking at a chart.

"Hey, why do they put those coins over the eyes?" the younger man asked.

"You don't see this too much anymore, but there are a couple of explanations," the older man said. "One is that sometimes people die with their eyes open and the coins help to keep the eyelids closed."

"What's the other?" the younger man said.

"Well, according to Greek mythology, the dead need to pay the ferryman who takes them across the river that separates the living from the dead."

"What happens if you don't have the money?"

"If you can't pay, you're condemned to wander the shores for a hundred years," the older man said. "Anyway, I don't think this poor fellow will need these where he's going."

He then removed the heavy silver dollars from the corpse's eyes and slipped them into his pocket. Suddenly, the dead man's eyes and mouth popped open.

"He looks like he's about to scream," the younger man said.

"Can you blame him?" the older man said.

He switched on the oven.

Jake and Tony

The boys stared at the rock etched with the name.

"Creepy," Jake said.

Tony ran his finger over the bumpy granite. It chilled him to the bone.

"It looks just like a tombstone," Jake said, nervously looking at Tony.

"Sure does."

The two boys had left their scouting group to explore around the campsite. They had been out in the Montana wilderness for over a week now on a canoe trip. Tomorrow was their last day.

"Just a weird coincidence I guess," Tony finally said, zipping up his jacket.

But Tony's eyes were wide and black as he stared at the strange rock. The rock, miles from civilization, had a name engraved on it. And not just any name, but his name: Tony Miller.

"One of the guys is just messing with you," Jake said. "We better get back."

"Yeah, they can be jerks sometimes," Tony said.

They walked back to camp as the night air settled in.

Both boys had trouble sleeping. Neither could shake that terrible image of the rock. Jake was worried about his best friend and happy that they would be heading home tomorrow. Tomorrow night they would be sleeping in their own beds.

The next morning they broke camp early, ready for the whitewater. Running the rapids would be the hardest part of the trip, but also the most exciting.

"Okay, boys, gather 'round," Scout Leader Dave said. "Young men, this is some serious river now. There will be danger involved. We don't want you getting thrown in the water and lost forever. Listen to the adults."

The canoes pushed off. It was their turn to ride in the larger, three-man canoe, which was good because they would be together. But the canoe, nicknamed The Bathtub, was hard to steer. This troubled Jake even more.

At first the water was slow and peaceful, meandering past tall pines and grassy meadows. But soon the sound of rapids roared up ahead.

"Paddle left, boys," Dave yelled over the thunderous river. It sounded like they were heading toward Niagara Falls. Jake was in the front. His heart was pounding as their canoe picked up speed and plunged into the foamy water. But they stayed in the main channel and shot the rapids easily. Soon they were back on calm waters, all six canoes together, cheering and howling.

"That was the best!" Jake shouted. They all gave each other high fives with their paddles.

Soon, they heard the next set of rapids, which were even louder.

"These will be the hardest, boys," shouted Dave. "We need to stay away from the big boulder in the middle of the river."

The river was faster than ever, their canoe gliding quickly over giant waves.

"Paddle harder, Jake! Look where we're heading!"

This was bad, Jake thought. They were flying towards the huge boulder and Jake couldn't stop thinking about Tony. Tony in church. Tony lying in a coffin. Tony pale, dead and still on white satin. He tried to push down these awful thoughts but the water was so fast and so strong that his fear was out of control. He could see Tony's mom crying. He could see them at the gravesite. He could see that awful rock being placed on top of Tony's grave.

"Come on! We're going right into it!" Dave yelled as water splashed into the canoe, soaking them.

The canoe lunged to the left, almost tipping over. Although Dave kept yelling, Jake could only hear the ferocious roar of the river. His mouth was bone dry. He couldn't swallow, couldn't even scream. He didn't know where the boulder was anymore or if anybody else was even still in the canoe behind him. Tony must have fallen out. Tony must be dead. That rock had warned us, Jake thought, we should have listened.

But soon the river was calm again. They had missed the rock! He turned around quickly, surprised to see that Tony and Dave were still in the boat.

"Tony!" Jake said. "You're okay! You made it!"

Tony smiled weakly, giving a thumbs up.

"Good job, boys," Dave said, wiping his sweaty face with his arm and catching his breath. "That was too close."

Later, after they had pulled off, Tony patted Jake on the back.

"Thanks, dude. I know you were looking after me. Let's never talk about the rock again. That was just too weird."

"Deal," said Jake.

But the deal only lasted until that night, when Tony called Jake late.

"That gravestone was right," Tony said, his voice shaking. "It was right."

"What are you talking about?" Jake said.

"When I got home, my mom told me to sit down," Tony said. "She said my uncle had a heart attack last night. He's dead."

"That's awful news," Jake said. "But what does that have to do with the rock we saw out there?"

"You don't understand," Tony said. "I was named after him. His name was Tony Miller, too. Just like on that tombstone."

The Old Graveyard

The old graveyard is a scary place at night.

No matter how hard the wind blows, it can't blow away the sad truth and the rotting smell of endless nothingness.

In the morning, the dead flowers are scattered hither and dither, but the coffins are still there, down in the ground. Leaking. The skin and the bones and the worms, getting wet.

The dead in the dark, wishing and waiting, hoping there is some truth to those zombie movies. Dreaming of the sun. Wondering what brains taste like.

The old graveyard is a scary place at night.

Especially if you're dead.

The old graveyard is a scary place at night. And it's always night, when you're dead.

Dead.

Dead.

Dead.

Going by… going by… going *bye*…
Bye, bye now…

They're Coming For You 5
Scary Stories that Scream to be Read…
Campfire Edition

by

O. Penn-Coughin

Copyright © 2011 O. Penn-Coughin

YOU COME TOO Publishing

They're Coming For You 5
O. Penn-Coughin
Scary Stories that SCREAM
to be Read... Campfire Edition

Introduction

These stories are meant to make you laugh, jump, and keep you up at night. They can be read around the campfire, on a sleepover, or any old time, alone or with family and friends.

Instructions **[like this]** are included for extra fun.

Whatever you do, don't take this book too seriously. People sometimes have a hard time remembering this. I suppose you can't blame them. After all, when you're having a nightmare, it's hard to remember you're having a nightmare.

Speaking of which, if you'd like to hear me read stories from the *They're Coming For You* series, check out **The Scary Story Podcast**.

Pleasant dreams. Or screams.

O. Penn-Coughin

Spider Season

"I haven't seen any of 'em around the campsite," Brody said. "Just the same, make sure you shake out your sleeping bag. You don't want one of them hairy things in there with you, laying their eggs or what have you."

"Yeah," Jackson said. "I saw a lot of them on the hike up. Big ones, too. They've been eating all summer and now it's mating season for the little buggers."

Noah shivered. Goose bumps covered his arms.

"That's gross," he said. "I hope I can get to sleep now."

He went inside his tent and unzipped the sleeping bag. He gave it a good thrashing, spreading the super sweaty sock smell all around.

"There," he said, crawling inside.

It was cold, cold enough he could see his breath.

He listened to his iPod in the dark for a while and started to drift off to sleep.

Brody and Jackson were already snoring in the other tent a few feet away.

During the night, Noah had a terrible dream. Something large and hairy crawled over his face and disappeared into his ear. A moment later he heard humming. It was a very familiar tune, but he couldn't place it.

Then a strange inhuman voice spoke.

"I like you," it said. "I like you *a lot*."

Noah woke up screaming. His head felt like it was wrapped in cotton candy. He ran outside and called to his friends.

"Jackson! Brody! Brody!"

There was an odd sound coming from the other tent.

Noah went over, unzipped the door, and looked inside. Then he started screaming again. Two giant spiders were inside, each chewing on something bloody. Then Noah saw that Brody and Jackson were missing *their heads*!

Noah heard the music again. This time he recognized the song. It was *Here Comes the Bride*. At that moment, something touched his shoulder. When he turned around, he saw an enormous black spider dressed all in white. It was licking its lips. Noah fainted.

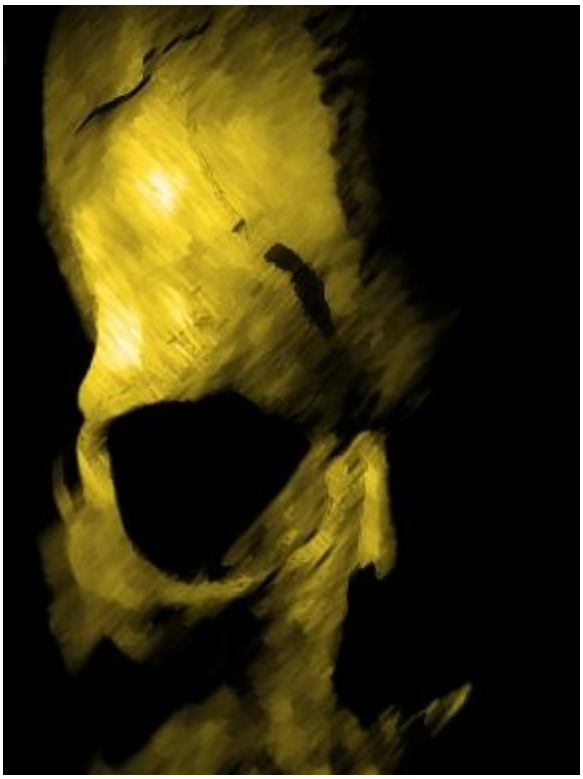
When Noah woke up the next morning, everything was fine. Outside he could hear birds chirping and Jackson and Brody as they went about their morning chores.

It had been a nightmare, just a crazy dream. Everything was fine. Everything was fine.

But one morning a few weeks after the camping trip, Noah felt strange. He sat in his chair in front of the TV and stared at the blank screen. He sat there all day. After a time his eyes clouded over and at some point he stopped moving.

Then his head fell off.

A moment later, hundreds and hundreds and hundreds of spiders crawled out.



Shadow Dance

The dream is always the same. I'm running through the woods at night. Crashing through the bramble. Running blind. Running, bark and branches cutting into me. Running.

At first I can't see what I'm running from. I just know it's something horrible. But then through my mind's eye I can see it as the moon comes through an opening in the treetops.

I'm running from my own shadow.

No, you mustn't. Don't. Stop. Don't laugh. It will hear you. It's no laughing matter.

You see, my shadow has turned dark and evil.

It does things behind my back. Terrible things. What happened to Sparky was no accident. That canoe didn't just drift off by itself. It was tied and secured. I had made sure of it. When the canoe was swept into the rapids it was only a matter of time before it capsized. And when it did and the little dog disappeared under the waves, I could have sworn I heard laughter coming from behind me. From right behind me. Demonic laughter.

When I turned around it acted normal, of course—as it always does—looking back like me. As if to say, "What? What? What are we looking at?"

But I know. I can feel it. It waits. It waits in the dark. When I'm not looking. When it can sneak off and lose itself among all the other shadows of the night.

The dream always ends the same. I wake up by a fire in the forest. A fire like this one. There are others with me. And I can see my shadow dancing in the trees to the rhythm of the flames and the beating of its own black heart. It smiles and winks at me. I know what it has in mind. But I am too far gone with fear and fatigue and foreshadowing. I yawn and rub my head and it senses its power growing as my eyes become slits. Sleep will take me soon. And then it will be free. I won't be able to stop it.

In the morning, they'll all be dead.

In the morning, *you'll* all be dead.

AAAH!

Teddy

His name was Teddy.
I saw him at the park.
He seemed like just another kid.
We played on the see-saw.
We went down the slide.
We played hide and seek
with my head.
How was I to know Teddy
had just escaped from a mental hospital.

Clown Kiss

Reggie woke from a terrible nightmare.

A fat, sweaty clown had ahold of him by the arm. Reggie struggled and fought but the clown just pulled him closer and closer. Reggie could smell its stale popcorn cigarette breath. The big red plastic nose grew larger and larger.

"Ever been kissed by a clown, boy?" the clown cackled. "It's like being bitten by a vampire—except you turn into a clown. Ha, ha, ha, ha, ha, ha…"

A moment later Reggie could feel the clown's thick red lips pressing against his own.

He woke up screaming and spitting.

Funny how those little kid fears never quite leave, Reggie thought after a while.

"Yeah, real funny," he sighed.

He knew it had been a dream.

Still, he cringed before looking in the mirror, half expecting to a see a clown staring back at him.

No, it was just him. A little tired, a little older, but him. Too old to be dreaming about such nonsense.

Reggie blew out a long sigh anyway.

As he walked down the hall he stumbled and fell into the wall. He felt dizzy and strange.

When he reached the kitchen, his sister started screaming and pointing at him. He could see the terror in her face but he didn't care. He seemed to be enjoying it really. And at that moment he began to understand: it had not been a dream.

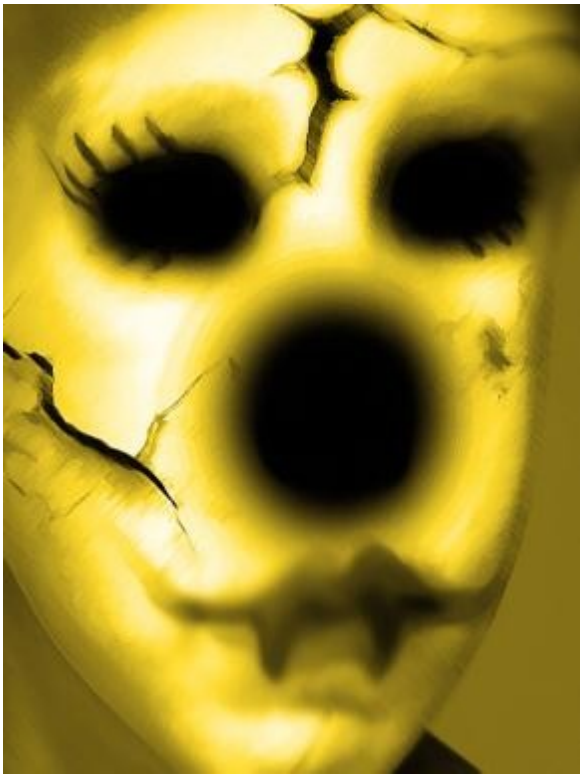
He caught a glimpse of his reflection in the window over the sink. A clown was looking back at him. It smiled. Reggie looked down at his big, red clown shoes and smiled, too.

He started walking toward his sister.

[Now scream like a little girl, a little girl who will soon be joining… *the circus*.]

"Ha, ha, ha, ha, ha, ha…"

AAAH!



The Pen

Gavin never really knew his grandfather. He was old and just sat in a wheelchair and said nothing and smelled bad. And now the old man was dead.

No one cried at the funeral. His grandfather left Gavin a pen. Gavin didn't see it as a fair trade, having to miss school and sit in the car for the long drive to the cemetery and wear a suit and tie and uncomfortable shoes in exchange for some lame pen.

"I remember Dad got that pen somewhere in Africa," his aunt said. "There's supposed to be a story behind it."

But no one seemed to know the story.

The pen was in an old leather case.

Gavin was so bored at the wake that he started looking at the pen. He unzipped the case and a folded piece of paper fell to the floor. Gavin picked it up and opened it.

"Wishes come true," it read. "Begin by writing them down."

Thinking of nothing better to do, Gavin turned over the paper and took the pen in his hand.

Get me out of here, he wrote.

"Hey, sport, get your coat," his dad said a moment later. "It's time to go."

"That was pretty cool," Gavin said to himself, but he wrote it off to coincidence.

On the car ride home, Gavin got hungry. He took out the pen and scribbled down two words: *ice cream*.

"Bill, let's stop at *Frozen Freddie's*," his mom said. "I've been dying to try that new flavor."

Gavin was speechless. A few minutes later, he was happily licking away on an ice cream cone.

The next day Gavin took the pen to school.

She can't see me, he wrote during math class.

He played games on his phone the whole period. The teacher walked right by several times and said nothing. Right before recess, Gavin folded a piece of paper into an airplane. While the teacher was writing something on the board, he let it fly. The airplane rose and dipped and rose again and smashed six inches above the teacher's head.

"Now who did that?" she said turning around.

She looked in Gavin's direction and said, "We'll talk about it during recess, Ruben."

"But—" the boy sitting behind Gavin began.

"You can tell me all about it *during recess*," she said.

During recess, Ruben and another student who hadn't finished his work stayed inside.

The teacher was about to talk to Ruben when the phone rang.

"One minute," she said holding up her finger.

"Hey, let's play Hangman," Ruben said to the other boy.

He got out a piece of paper and took the pen from Gavin's desk.

Outside Gavin was playing basketball and dribbling the ball with both hands at the same time.

"You can't do that," another boy said, taking the ball away. "That's double dribble."

"Your mom double dribbles," Gavin said. "I do what I want."

He took the ball back and began bouncing the ball again with two hands.

Back inside the classroom the teacher was still on the phone. The two boys finished their game.

"I win!" Ruben said, completing the stick figure. "The word was *L-O-S-E-R*."

Then he wrote *Gavin* on the paper with an arrow pointing to the hanged man.

Out on the basketball court, Gavin suddenly started having trouble breathing. He fell down by the free throw line. The other children gathered around.

Gavin began to turn blue.

Sleepovers are for Girls

"Sleepovers are for girls," Morton whined.

"I'm sorry, dear," his mom said. "But you can't go camping right now. Not with that killer on the loose."

There had been news stories recently about a killer stalking the local woods. So far, there had been eight victims—all young boys who had either been hiking or camping.

At first the police thought they had all died of natural causes. Death in each case was determined to be the result of heart failure. And although traces of an unidentifiable substance were found on the victims' lips, there wasn't a mark on any of the bodies.

But then a local psychic was brought in. She studied the crime scene photos and claimed she could see the ghost of a girl hovering over the boys' bodies and smiling.

"All right," Morton said and sighed. "But can't we call it something else?"

"How about an Indoor Campout?" his mom said. "You and your friends can set up tents down in the basement and Dad can grill some burgers and hotdogs. It'll be loads of fun and I don't think anyone will miss the bug bites."

"Okay, that actually sounds pretty good," Morton said.

Morton's mom was right. He and his friends had a great time that night.

"Can I get anyone anymore hot chocolate before going to bed?" she said. "Oh, and don't forget to brush your teeth."

A few minutes later Morton headed to the bathroom. Someone's business still lingered thick in the air. Morton opened the window over the toilet and felt a warm breeze blow in. He began brushing his teeth and silver braces.

He was almost finished when he felt the air grow strangely cold. Suddenly he could see his breath.

Then in the mirror he saw a girl standing behind him.

"Hey, no girls," Morton said, turning around. "This party's just for bo—"

And then he stopped.

This was no ordinary girl. Morton knew at that moment that she had to be the ghost that had killed those other boys.

Nothing about her dress or hair gave it away. Most of her face, too, was rather average. It was all in the eyes.

She didn't have any.

There were two deep, dark holes where they should have been. Their terrible blackness seemed to grow as she floated closer and closer, until they blocked out almost everything else.

Morton wanted to run, he wanted to turn away or at least squeeze his eyes shut. But he couldn't. He was powerless to do anything except stare into those horrible holes.

And then the girl spoke.

"*Kiss me*," she moaned. "*Kiss meeeeee…*"

She pursed her lips as she put her hand on Morton's forearm.

Then the lights flickered and went out.

A moment later Morton felt something hideous touch his lips. His screams never made it out of his mouth.

Morton couldn't breathe. It felt like someone was squeezing all the air out of his chest. A terrible pain then exploded under Morton's breastbone. A second later his heart stopped.

The girl smiled and held Morton's dead body in her embrace for a time before letting it fall to the floor.

"*Kiss me*," she moaned softly. "*Kiss meeeeee…*"

[Now pucker up and reach out toward someone as if you're going to kiss them.]

The Marshmallows Started Screaming

The marshmallows started screaming.
Wouldn't you?
AAAH!

Snap

There I was, going in all alone with only the keeper to beat, when I got taken down from behind.

"Wow," she said. "And you were so close."

I listened for the whistle, looked around for the ref, certain not only that I would be awarded a penalty kick but that she would earn a red card.

But all I saw was that the ball was still in play with the action going down the other way.

And I saw her.

She hovered over me and smiled an evil smile.

I got up and drove my shoulder into her chest as I ran up the field. She just laughed.

"What was *that*?" I said to the ref. "How was that not a red card, dragged down from behind in the box?"

"First, I don't like your tone," he said. "And second, there was no one around you when you went down."

He must have been blind or paid off was my only thought. But then I looked over at our sideline. No one was arguing. Everything was going along as if nothing had happened.

The hell with it, I thought. Move past it.

A few minutes later I found a spot, a safe distance from the last defender, and waved for the ball. One of our midfielders saw me, sending the ball my way. I pushed the pass with the outside of my left foot around the defender and headed in on goal.

I heard the whistle blow. Their goalkeeper didn't even try to stop me. I saw that the linesman had his flag up.

"No way!" I said. "No way was I offside."

"I must admit I can't believe it myself," she said.

She smiled again. Her face was without color, completely pale. Her lips were almost black. If I had been going down a dark alley alone I think I would have found her scary. But I needed to focus.

"You have to be better than the other team," my dad always told me. "And sometimes you have to be better than the referee."

The next time I touched the ball, I made them pay.

I went around three of them, including Goth Girl. But then I felt someone grab my hair.

"Not so fast," she said as my head jerked to the side and my eyes filled up with tears.

She yanked me off the ball.

"Hey!" I shouted, but again the ref called nothing.

"I guess he's just letting us play," she said. "And don't you think that's how it oughta be with a game of this magnitude?"

There was a black gleam in her hollow eyes.

"All right, then," I said.

As I trotted by, I thrust my elbow deep into her stomach. Again, she just laughed.

The first half ended without any score.

I finally put one in early in the second half, but it was taken away by another phantom offside call.

"Do you guys buy your white canes at the same place?" I shouted to the ref.

He pulled out a yellow card.

"Not another word," he said.

I had to be careful. This guy was clearly bought off, and I knew he wouldn't hesitate to throw me out. What I couldn't understand was why the coach wasn't backing me up.

The other team scored with about 15 minutes left in the game.

The next ball that came my way found me outnumbered by two defenders. But I went right and then faked left, causing them to run into each other. I drove in on goal alone. The keeper held close to her line. I dribbled in, so that the goal grew huge. I was about to tap the ball into the back of the net when she scissor tackled me from my left. She didn't come anywhere near the ball, which rolled harmlessly away.

"Aaah!" I screamed as I went flying.

"I know," she said. "That's gotta hurt."

She reached down to help me up. That lipstick must have rubbed off because her teeth looked black, too, as she smiled over me.

I looked around for the ref, but I knew by now that there would be no call.

Deep in stoppage time, I had one last chance.

I received the ball with my back toward goal, about 20 yards out. She was on me, but I faked right and spun left, using my elbow to separate myself from her. Then, as I was about to drive my foot into the ball, she punched me in the jaw.

She got just enough of me. The ball beat the keeper but nicked the outside of the post before going out of bounds.

That's how it ended.

As the rest of her team celebrated, she stuck her hand out to shake mine.

"Good game," she said. "Too bad someone had to lose."

She chuckled and held her black smile a moment too long.

That's when I lost it. I mean, really lost it.

I pounced on her with all my might. I kicked and clawed and pulled her hair. I gouged her eyes and bit her ear. She didn't even put up a fight. Through it all, she just kept laughing. They started pulling me off, but not before I got in one more attack. I grabbed her head with both hands and twisted hard. I snapped her neck and heard it pop.

"That'll teach you," I said.

That's the end of the story.

I killed her. I killed her and I would do it again.

It was the championship game, after all. I wasn't going to take any prisoners.

They have me in this padded cell now. I'm wearing a white jacket with long sleeves tied behind me.

I confessed several times, but they keep trying to convince me I didn't kill anyone.

"What are you talking about?" the doctor says. "Who did you kill?"

Number 2, I say.

"I've talked to players, coaches, spectators, and the referee. The other team didn't have a Number 2," he says. "There was no Number 2. You didn't kill anyone. And if you killed someone, where did the body go? All anyone saw was you, alone on the ground, kicking and punching and screaming. Some people thought they heard you laughing, too. They said you were acting odd the entire game."

He even shows me a doctored video to prove it. All trace of her has been removed, of course.

"You know, sometimes people have strange reactions to stress," he says over and over again. "I'd like to help you get better."

He's a liar. I know he's trying to trick me. The lies spill from him. They're all in on it, trying to confuse me, get me to slip up. I'm not sure what their game is. What reason they would have to get to believe I imagined the whole thing? But they don't worry me.

What has me troubled is why I still hear her laughing. I know that would be impossible.

She visits me at night sometimes, too. She stands in the corner and tries to crack her neck back in place. Sometimes the popping sound keeps me up. Her evil smile grows with every failed attempt.

But I know she's not real.

She's not real because she's dead.

I killed her.

I killed her.

I killed her.

I killed her.

I killed her.

I killed her…

All the same, there she is again, smiling in the corner.

Pop.

Crack.

Pop.
Crack.
Pop.
AAAH!

What's His Name

Your fingernails claw too late through the dirt,
The worms just ate your liver for dessert.
You stumble around looking for your head.
You find Smith instead,
Who's also quite dead.
Your brain dismembered,
You can't remember
His first name was Ned.

No Such Thing

Jason and Juan were visiting an old friend.

After a while their conversion turned to the supernatural.

"There's no such thing as ghosts," Ernie said. "That stuff's all fake."

"You're wrong," Jason said. "I've seen them myself."

"Me, too," Juan said.

"What did you see?" Ernie said. "There can be a big difference between what's there and what we think is there."

"Ghosts are as real as you and me," Jason said.

"And me," Juan said.

"I don't think so," Ernie said.

"Well, if you don't believe us," Jason said. "Just look in the mirror."

Ernie went over to Juan's car and slid behind the wheel. When he looked at his reflection in the rearview mirror, his mouth dropped open. He was more mist and fog than skin and bone. He reached out and put his hand through the windshield. Then he floated back to the grass where Jason and Juan were standing.

"Well, I'll be," Ernie said.

"Oh, but you already *are*, my friend," Juan said. "You already are."

"Well, it's getting late," Jason said. "We'll see you, Ernie."

Jason and Juan got into the car and drove away from the cemetery.

Crazy Jerry

The story is told of a man who used to live in this wilderness. They called him Crazy Jerry. He lived in a beat-up, old cabin not far from here. They say he went mad one day. They say he started collecting human bones. They say he would do anything to get them.

Ah, what do *they* know?

[Stare at your audience with wide, crazy eyes and shout:]

AAAH!

Ha, ha, ha, ha, ha, ha, ha, ha, ha, ha, ha…

The story is told.

Papa's Dream Dress

The young girl came down from the attic wearing an orange, vanilla swirl-colored dress.

There was something about it that woke something deep inside the old man.

He stared at it for a long time and it slowly dawned on him that it was the dress his dead wife had worn when they had first met more than 70 years earlier.

He stood up with the help of his cane. But something was different. His legs felt steady and strong. Somehow he wasn't an old man anymore. And the girl wasn't a girl. She was his wife.

He reached out a muscular arm and grabbed her around the waist.

Then he began to twirl her around the room.

Round and round they went.

And round and round some more.

Faster and faster.

She laughed and the room began to blur and then became a blur. The air grew hot, almost too hot to touch. And still they spun. Round and round. Faster and faster.

And then the very air exploded like thunder.

The girl went flying against the wall.

When she picked herself up and looked back, the old man was gone.

There was only a pile of smoking ashes in the middle of the floor.

Dead Johnson Falls

The river water was dark, almost black. Mysterious swirls and countercurrents appeared and disappeared while eddies hugged the shores. The water flowed gently but in the distance, a large waterfall spit up spray. It got louder and louder with every paddle stroke.

Joe started making his way toward the takeout on river right.

Suddenly he saw something white rise through the dark water and then pass under the kayak. An instant later a loud crash came from the bottom of the boat. Joe looked down and saw water pouring in through a large hole in the plastic hull.

And then, to his complete and utter horror, he saw a skull, a human skull, bob up between his legs. Joe sat frozen in horror. The head floated on the water's surface for a few seconds and then turned and faced Joe. If it still had eyes, it would have been looking right at him. When it opened its mouth as if to speak, Joe began screaming.

The screams cut through the night and woke the other scouts.

"Wake up, Joe," Darren said, shaking his friend. "Wake up."

Joe sat up, breathing hard. He was covered in sweat.

A moment later Darryl, the scout leader, poked his head in the tent.

"You two doin' all right in here?" he said.

"Yeah, Joe was just having a bad dream," Darren said.

"I keep telling you ladies," Darryl said. "If you can't handle the scary stories, just go inside your tent and listen to your *iPutz* or whatever it's called."

Joe could only nod and smile weakly.

Since the trip had started, the boys had been trying to top one another as they sat around the campfire at night telling scary stories. Most of the stories were pretty lame, but they were fun just the same. But now Joe felt dumb for having let one of the lamest into his dreams.

A few hours earlier, Dewey had told them one he called *Jumping Jehosaphat*.

"A long time ago, a trapper named Johnson was rafting down this river," Dewey began. "He stopped at an Indian village a few miles upriver from here. They told him what to expect from the river ahead. They said not to camp in the lands between the village and the waterfall. They said it was a sacred burial ground. They said to start early and paddle hard and to pull off near the giant oak tree on the right when the river got loud. They said —"

"Seems like they said a lot of stuff," Joe said and chuckled.

"Yeah, well, they did," Dewey said. "Now let me continue."

"Go 'head on," Joe said.

"Anyway, Johnson had too much whiskey the night before and he didn't wake up till the sun was high up in the sky. He had a terrible headache and mostly just floated lazily down the river that day. By the time it started getting dark, he was still far from the giant oak tree, so he decided to make camp for the night. In the sacred burial ground."

"Ooooh," Darren said in fake fear. "I think I just stained my shorts."

"Too late," Sam said. "I smelled your stains all day long sitting behind you in the canoe."

"You're a sick liar," Darren said.

They all laughed except for Dewey, who waited patiently until it was quiet again.

"Well, the next day Johnson didn't stop at the giant oak tree," Dewey whispered. "For reasons that are still a mystery to this day, he stayed on the river. And plunged right down the middle of that waterfall.

"His body was never found. Some say an angry spirit dragged him down those falls. Some say his lonely, ghostly skeleton is still down there and that it cries out for company on quiet nights.

"'I just want someone to talk to,' it whispers. 'Won't you please talk to me, me, meeee?'"

After Dewey was quiet for a while, the rest of the boys figured out they had come to the end of the story.

"Oooh, real scary," Sam said. "I was particularly terrified by the horrible boredom I felt."

“But why’s it called *Jumping Jehosaphat*?” Dwayne asked. “There’s no one in the story named Jehosaphat and there’s no jumping.”

“BOOO!” Dewey suddenly shouted. “Made you jump.”

“Oh, no, you didn’t,” Dwayne said, hoping no one had seen him leave the ground. “That’s just you being stupid.”

“All right,” Darryl said. “Time to call it a night. You all want to be rested for our last day on the river. We’ve got a lot of portaging to look forward to before we get back to civilization.”

The boys moaned and started shuffling off toward their tents.

The next day the scouts packed up their supplies and loaded the kayaks and canoes. They paddled hard and portaged around several dangerous rapids.

“One more portage,” Darryl said late that afternoon. “And you don’t want to miss it. So let’s look alive out there.”

They floated through a few more calm miles and then heard the distant roar of Dead Johnson Falls.

“Keep right,” Darryl called out to the paddlers. “Start bearing right.”

Joe had finally shaken the bad feeling the dream had left behind. His head still hurt from not having gotten enough sleep, but he could tough it out. Like the others, he started paddling toward the right.

That’s when something hit the bottom of his kayak. He looked down and saw a large hole open up in the hull. Water began pouring in. And then something floated to the surface. Something white.

It had to be. It couldn’t be. But it was. It was the skull from the nightmare.

“Please talk to meeee,” it wailed.

Joe began screaming.

In his panic, he threw away his paddle.

“What’s he doing?” Darren said.

“Right!” Darryl shouted. “Keep right!”

Already on shore, the rest of the group joined in.

“C’mon, Joe. This way, buddy! Over here! Over here!”

There was still time for Joe to swim for it. Maybe he could grab hold of a branch or crawl onto a rock ledge.

But it was no use. He was too busy screaming and slapping at the water down between his legs to try to save himself. The kayak just kept drifting farther and farther toward the falls. At one point it spun around so that Joe was facing back upriver.

They could see him batting at something. But they couldn’t make out what. They could see his pale, tortured face contorted in terror.

The water began to pick up speed.

“Do something!” Darren said to Darryl.

But there was nothing to do. They could only watch helplessly as Joe’s kayak disappeared behind the mist of Dead Johnson Falls.

“We’ll have so much to talk about,” the skull said, grinning at Joe as they went over. “Name’s Johnson. But I reckon you can call me Dead. Reckon I can call you dead, too.”

The skull’s wicked laughter was drowned out by the roar of the water.

They found the kayak a few miles downriver.

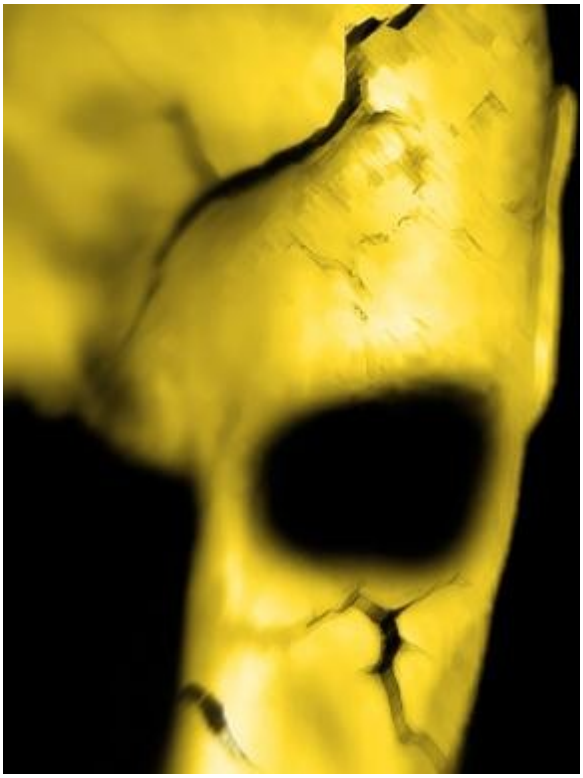
They searched and searched, but Joe’s body was never found.

That’s pretty much the end of the story.

Except that some say the two ghost skeletons can be heard talking during quiet nights.

Listen. I think I hear them now. Why, yes. I believe I hear them calling your name.

[Whisper the name of someone in the audience three times. Add a scream at the end if necessary.]



Ruth and Johnny, Again

Ruth and Johnny went car camping.
The sun went down.
Ruth heard a noise.
Johnny said, “I think it’s a clown.”
Ruth said, “Or it could be a bear.”
John drove the hell out of there.

The Return of the Clown from Down Under

The old, rickety rollercoaster kept climbing through the darkness. Up, up, up. It finally reached the top and paused for what seemed like an eternity. Elmer could smell sulfur. He heard an evil chuckle coming from behind him. He turned and saw the familiar face, smiling hideously from ear to ear. Its eyes glowing red, the clown began laughing in Spanish.

Ja, ja, ja.

Elmer tried to stand, but a hand pulled him down.

"Where do you think you're going?" the clown whispered in his ear. "The fun is just beginning."

The rollercoaster began its decent. Down, down, down it dropped. Faster and faster it plunged toward the ocean of fire far below. Elmer closed his eyes.

His shoes suddenly felt hot. Something was burning. Elmer looked down and saw that his legs were on fire. The flames grew higher and higher, reaching his…

Aaaah!

"You all right, man?" his roommate called from across the dark dorm room.

"Just a dream," Elmer said, breathing hard. "Sorry if I woke you."

But as he stared up at the ceiling, trying to convince himself otherwise, Elmer knew it had been more than a dream. The clown was back. He was sure of it. He could feel it all around.

It had been 10 years since he had seen the clown. Since it had melted and disappeared into the gym floor at his elementary school. Since it had said: "I'll be waiting for you down there, my little *vato*."

Elmer had kept the promise he made to himself that day. He had been good. But now the clown was back.

The next night Elmer woke to the sound of circus music coming from his closet. He looked over and saw that his roommate wasn't home yet. The music played slow and distorted, like the batteries were dying. The closet door slowly squeaked open. Elmer half expected to see the huge floppy red shoes.

Instead, a small boy stepped out.

Elmer turned on the light. There was something familiar about the boy, but he couldn't quite place the face. And then it hit him. It was *him*. It was Elmer when he was about eight years old, whn he had last seen the clown.

The circus music stopped. Little Elmer began to speak. But the voice that came out was the voice of the clown.

"Long time no see," it said. "Too long."

"You don't scare me anymore," Elmer said, shaking.

"*Mentiroso*," the clown boy said beginning to fade away. "Liar, liar, pants on fire. Ha, ha, ha, heh, heh, heh…"

Elmer sat there staring past the closet long after the boy had disappeared.

This was no dream, he thought. This was real. It was happening again. It was all happening again.

He finally turned out the light and rested his head on the pillow.

Suddenly a small hand grabbed his wrist in the dark. He could smell the evil as it exploded up his nostrils. Elmer gasped and struggled to free himself. The boy's grip was that of a child and Elmer broke away, running toward the door. He stood in the open door frame for a moment looking back at the bed.

"Liars have a special place down there in the funhouse," little evil Elmer said and smiled.

Elmer took off down the hall.

The next night Elmer was walking back from the library. He was alone on the path leading to the dorm. As he reached the front of the building, a small figure stepped out of the shadows. Elmer took a step toward it.

"I took care of you once," he said, remembering the holy water-filled balloon he had used to put an end to the clown all those years ago. "I'll take care of you again."

"You took care of nothing, *amigo*," the clown said. "*Nada*."

Elmer clenched his fists.

“But don’t sweat it, bro,” the voice said. “I’m not here to do you any harm. I just came back to remind you I haven’t forgotten. I’m still waiting. We’ll have so much fun together. It’ll be worth the wait. I’ll keep your seat warm. *Bien caliente*.”

And with that the boy turned into the clown and then back into the boy. He began laughing in Spanish.

Ja, ja, ja, ja, ja, ja…

He then burst into flames. And then he was gone.

But Elmer knew he would never, never, ever really leave him.

Never.

The Beach

A cold wind blew down the beach. The waves pounded the shore in the dark. The kids huddled around the campfire telling scary stories.

Suddenly the sand beneath them started to move.

A huge hole opened up. First it swallowed the fire. Then it swallowed the children. Then it swallowed itself. Then everything was still again. Everything was as before.

A cold wind blew down the beach. The waves pounded the shore in the dark.

The House

Julia hadn't been back to the old house in 10 years. She had never felt comfortable there. It had given her the creeps for as long as she could remember. But as she got older, it became much more serious than that.

There was the scratching coming from inside the wall behind the headboard. There was the breathing man under her bed. There was the corpse of the little girl floating with her in the tub when she would take a bath.

And there was the certain knowledge that the house wanted her dead.

She had promised herself that when she was old enough—if the house let her live that long—she would leave and never come back. And that's exactly what she did when she turned 18.

But after Julia's parents died, she knew she would have to go back. The house belonged to her now. She didn't want it, of course. She immediately decided she would put it up for sale just as soon as she went through it to see if there was anything worth keeping.

She dreaded having to return and face all the old demons and she had put off going back as long as she could. But her lawyer had told her that this was something that couldn't wait any longer.

Her stomach was in an uproar for days before but as soon as Julia pulled up, she sensed that the house had changed. Where before only weeds had grown, colorful flowers now covered the front yard.

When she walked in, sunlight poured in through the large windows. She remembered the house being much, much darker. Always dark. No matter how many curtains were opened and lights turned on. Always dark. And always cold.

But now there was a warm cheeriness to the place that almost made Julia want to reconsider her decision to sell. It didn't seem so bad. It felt happy. It felt like it had never felt before. It felt like home.

Julia walked up the stairs and into her old bedroom. Somehow she was sure that the old ghosts were gone. She could feel their distance somewhere far beyond the horizon. There would be no more scratching in the wall. No more breathing under the bed. No more dead girl floating in the tub.

"Yes," Julia said, amazed at what was coming out of her mouth. "I'm going to live here. This is my home now."

She felt as happy as the day she had left. But all the emotion had drained her. She suddenly felt dead tired.

She pulled back the covers on the bed, half expecting to find a colony of spiders. Instead the sheets spoke of a fire on a cold night, of hot milk and honey. The pillow whispered her name.

Julia crawled into bed.

Everything was so warm and bright. She closed her eyes. It was all perfect. The old fears melted away and peace engulfed her completely.

She wasn't interested in why the house seemed so different. There was no need for questions. No need for answers. She didn't care. Didn't care. Didn't care…

She didn't care that the house had burned to the ground *13 months earlier*.

She didn't care that the breathing man was waking up—with more than breathing on his mind this time. Didn't care that the dead little girl had turned evil and was stepping out of the bathtub. She didn't care that the charred remains of her dead mother were coming up the stairs.

Didn't care. Didn't care.

[Yawn.]

Didn't c—**AAAH!**

The Bones of Lonesome Jones

"All right, rube, just climb up the lava wall, get past the bones of Lonesome Jones, and out the other side," Jake said. "It's really not a big deal—unless you're scared of ghosts."

Frank, of course, was terrified of ghosts. He had never seen one but knew they were real. Knew some were evil, too. Had no idea what he was thinking when he accepted the dare of going into Lonesome Jones Cavern at night.

"I'm not scared of no Lonesome Jones," Frank said, sounding tough. "I ain't no little kid."

"Whatever, fella," Jake said. "Tell us all about it when you come out. I'll meet you on the other side in about 30 minutes."

Frank checked his flashlight. It had a strong lamp but in the blackness of the cave it seemed like it gave off just a tiny pinprick of light. He took a deep, shaky breath. And then another.

All right, he told himself. *Might as well get started.*

He walked, slowly at first, and made it to the lava wall in about a quarter of an hour. The surface of the six-foot tall obstacle was glass smooth. Frank tried to scale the wall several times but only managed to slide back down. There didn't seem to be anything to grab. Nowhere to put his feet.

"How am I supposed to get up this thing?" Frank said, beginning to feel hopeless.

And then he saw the old rope hidden deep in a corner crack where the lava met the wall. A minute later he was up.

The ceiling was lower here and he had to crouch down in spots so as not to hit his head.

He walked about 100 yards and heard something. It sounded like rocks being struck together.

Or were they bones?

"Calm down, calm down," Frank said.

But his heart would have none of it, racing out of all control.

"Hey, Jake, that's not funny," Frank called out. "Cut it out."

And then he saw it.

The white, bony Ghost of Lonesome Jones. Coming toward him.

Frank fainted on the spot.

"What's taking that fool?" Jake said. "It's gettin' cold out here."

A moment later he heard a noise coming from inside the cave.

"Finally," Jake said.

But he didn't see any light.

"Hey, where's your flashlight, fella?"

Frank stepped out of the cave opening without answering.

His face was hidden under his hoodie.

"Well, congratulations, rube," Jake said, sticking out his hand. "I didn't think you had it in you."

Frank reached out his hand.

A moment later Jake felt something grip his fingers. Something strong and bony.

"What the—" he said. "Let go, man."

But Frank didn't listen. He just kept squeezing harder and harder.

Jake reached out his other hand and grabbed Frank by the neck.

The two boys began wrestle dancing in the moonlight.

Jake could feel the bones in his hand cracking as they went round and round.

At some point the hood fell away from Frank's head. Jake could now see what should have been Frank's face. Instead, there was only a skull.

"No!" Jake yelled.

He let go of the thing's bony throat and felt himself grow all weak inside.

The skeleton began dragging Jake into the cave.

"No," Jake whimpered. "Nooo."

The stars blurred overhead. The world went spinning.
And then black.

Let Me In

"Let me in," the tiny voice whispered. "Please let me in."

Sam reached for the flashlight and got out of his sleeping bag. He unzipped the tent door.

It was the same dream he had been having since the trip started.

The small child floated above the ground a few feet away from the tent. It called again.

"Let me in, Sam."

The large black eyes stood out against the bluish white skin of its dead face. Bones poked through in places.

The scene had repeated itself so many times that Sam was no longer scared and had reached the point where he knew even while he was dreaming that it was just a dream.

"You're not real," Sam said. "I'm just having a nightmare."

The little boy started to sob and then began to fade until he completely disappeared.

Sam woke up.

"You're wrong," the boy suddenly said, now next to Sam. "I *am* real."

This was new.

He smelled horrible, as if he had rotted away from the inside. He stretched out his tiny arms toward Sam.

"He is right, Sam," another voice then said. "Just because you have a nightmare about something doesn't mean it's not real."

Sam had no doubt the voice was the soundtrack of evil itself. Just hearing it hurt, like fingernails on a chalkboard. Hot, humid, putrid breath blew over Sam's face and something wet and slimy licked his ear.

His backbone shredded with fear like lettuce for a taco, Sam turned around slowly and saw—**AAAH!**

Run

First her left ear turned black.
Then it fell off.
Then the same thing happened to her nose.
Then she came looking for you.

The Creaking Door

The creaking door woke Charlotte in the middle of the night.

It was nothing new.

She always closed it over at night to keep down the TV noises coming from her sister's room. But she stopped short of shutting the door completely because she wanted Mister Jones to be able to come in during the night after he made his rounds around the neighborhood alleys.

"Meow," Mister Jones said loudly, jumping on the bed. "Meeeeow."

"All right, Mister Jones," Charlotte whispered. "Get to sleep."

The cat curled up by her feet.

When the alarm clock went off a few hours later, Charlotte stretched and forced herself to get up. As was usually the case, she had forgotten about the squeaking door.

She shuffled down the hall toward the bathroom. Charlotte looked in the mirror.

What she saw made her gasp in horror.

It was her face. But it wasn't her face. Some*thing* had taken its place. Sagging skin too pale to belong to something living. The eyes were closed as if the thing was dead. And yet, somehow Charlotte could still see, even though she wished she couldn't.

She stood there shaking, trying to wake herself from the nightmare.

But when she looked again the thing was still there. And it had its eyes open.

They were black. Completely black. No whites. Just a solid mass of evil darkness, like pools of putrid sewer water.

And then it opened its mouth. A black tongue passed over the lips several times. It squinted until the eyes were nothing more than slits.

"Tonight," it whispered, fading away. "Tonight, *Charlotte*."

A moment later it was gone and Charlotte's face was back.

Charlotte turned and ran back to her room.

She tried to get her breathing under control.

"That had to be a dream," she said, still shivering. "Had to be."

As the day wore on, Charlotte managed to convince herself that she was right. She reminded herself that she usually had bad dreams when she ate spaghetti sauce too late at night, as she had done the night before.

"Gonna have to stick to Alfredo from now on," she mumbled, driving home from work.

Charlotte had no trouble falling asleep that night. But once again, the creaking of the door woke her.

"Come on up here, Jonesy," she called softly. "Come on."

She reached down in the dark and petted the cat's head. Her fingers touched something wet and sticky.

"Got into another fight, huh?" she said. "Well, I'd hate to see the other guy."

Charlotte closed her eyes and waited to feel the familiar weight leap on the bed.

But nothing happened. Mister Jones didn't jump up and he didn't meow.

Strange, she thought. He's not in here.

"No," a voice suddenly whispered. "But I am."

It was the voice of the face in the mirror. It was the last voice Charlotte would ever hear. Except for her own screams. Her own useless screams.

[Pause. Let them wait for it…]

AAAH!

Open Window

The old man sat in front of the open window. It was his favorite place. He looked out upon the world and thought his secret thoughts.

His legs didn't work anymore. Neither could he speak or hold a pen. He was trapped inside his mind. But he had the window. It made life worth living.

One hot day in August a cold wind blew in through the open window. It slammed the bedroom door. The old man could feel the evil of it in his bones. He heard it whisper his name. The wind passed through him and he immediately felt the change.

He suddenly stood up, kicking over the wheelchair. He took one step. And then another.

He felt his tongue and throat grow strong again.

"I'm coming for you, children," he said softly.

He stopped in front of the mirror and saw the crazed expression on his face. It made his heart pound with excitement.

He walked down the hall toward the grandchildren's room.

Evil thoughts played in his mind.

"I'm coming for you, children…"

Ocean Clowns

It was 4th of July weekend and the beaches were packed.

A mother began to scream for her child to get out of the water.

"Jenny!" she yelled hysterically. "JENNY!"

At first people around her thought the woman had stayed out in the sun too long. But then they looked out on the water. They saw it, too. Heading for shore. Heading for the children in the water. Pretty soon they were all screaming.

"Get out of the water!"

"Swim!"

"Run!"

"RUN!"

The people in the water began to splash and panic.

They now saw it, too. It was coming toward them. It was coming toward them!

A rainbow-colored wig with two big, red floppy shoes kicking up water behind it. It was… It had to be…

A clown!

And then to her horror, the lifeguard saw that it wasn't just one clown. The water was suddenly full of them. Hundreds and hundreds of them. Hundreds of clowns swimming to shore.

And then they started coming out of the water.

Sad clowns. Happy clowns. Scary clowns. Circus clowns. Hobo clowns. Rodeo clowns. Clowns on unicycles. Clowns on stilts. Clowns and more clowns coming out of small cars. Juggling clowns. Clowns squirting water from plastic flowers. Clowns tripping over themselves. Clowns tripping over other clowns. Clowns standing on the back of horses, ostriches, and sea monkeys.

The horror.

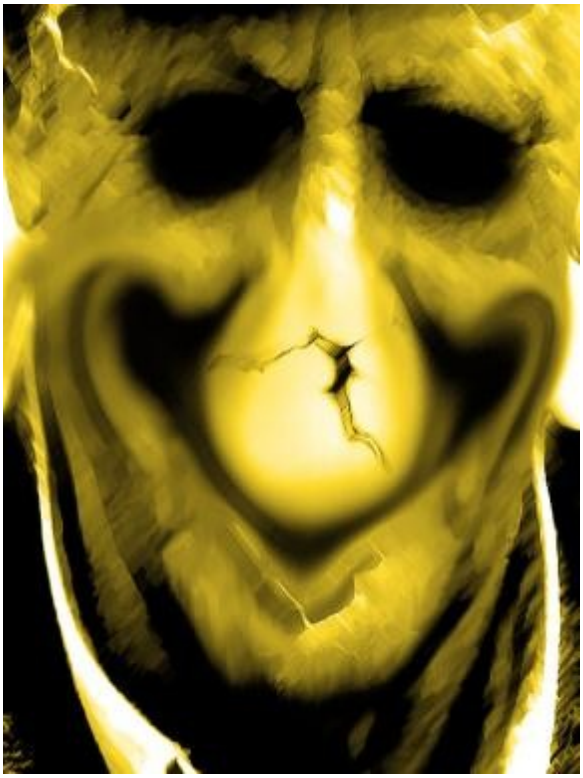
The horror!

First the National Guard was called in. Then the army. It was no use.

The clowns could not be stopped.

It was the end of the world. Not by some giant meteor. Not by a hole in the ozone. Not by disease. Not by flood or famine. Not by fire. Not by ice. It was the end of the world. By clowns.

CLOWNS!



Food Poisoning

First the soap ran out.
Then the toilet paper ran out.
Then the waiter brought your order.
Then you began to turn a little green.
Then—
[Insert a long farting noise here.]

Sol

Sarah and Sophie had been planning the sleepover for months. Finally, everything was ready. They had gotten permission. Everyone they had invited had said yes. It was going to be the best.

Sarah was super excited when she rang the doorbell.

Sophie's older brother, Sol, answered.

"What's he doing here?" she asked Sophie under her breath as they climbed the stairs.

"He has a cold and he's staying home tonight," Sophie said. "But he promised not to bother us."

Sarah sighed deeply.

Sol always gave her the creeps. He would hold his look until it became a full-blown stare and never said anything. Sarah couldn't tell what he was thinking behind those black eyes, but she knew it wasn't good. And he was always sweaty. Even in winter, a shiny coat of liquid creepiness covered his skinny, hollow face.

But once the party started, Sarah forgot all about Sol. She was having a great time.

And then she had to go to the bathroom. Sophie's house was old and the upstairs bedrooms shared one bathroom. Sarah had to walk down a long hallway to get to it. She hated the idea of sitting where Sol had been. Her stomach started doing backflips at the idea.

Maybe she should just hold it, she thought. But she really had to go. She carefully folded and placed toilet paper over the seat and sat down.

Afterward, as she walked down the hall, she heard sobbing coming from Sol's room. She stopped at the closed door and listened.

"Why?" he cried. "Why?"

"Because," another voice said. *"Because."*

The voice sounded dark and ominous and evil.

Suddenly Sarah leaned in too close to the door and lost her balance. She swung her arms and arched her back and managed to regain her equilibrium, but not without first gently nudging the door. To her horror, it slowly creaked opened.

Sol was crying on his knees in the middle of the floor as if praying. And he was alone.

Sarah and Sol looked at each other for one sweaty, terror-filled moment. Then she took off running down the hall.

Something inside her, something other than panic, told her to keep running. She passed by Sophie's bedroom and headed downstairs two steps at a time. In a few seconds she was out on the driveway.

As she ran down the dark sidewalk, the image of Sol's face flooded her mind. He had looked so sad and helpless there on his knees. She couldn't help but feel sorry for him, although she didn't know why.

"Wait," Sol called from behind. "Wait."

Sarah was torn. She was afraid but at the same time it wasn't Sol she feared.

She stopped under a streetlight and turned around.

Sol caught up to her. He put his clammy hand on her arm.

He was sweatier than Sarah had ever seen him. He didn't say anything but his eyes seemed to be pleading, almost begging.

"What is it?" Sarah said. "What's the matter?"

Sol didn't answer. He just stood there sweating. Great drops rolled down his face. And then the drops turned to streams. And then he started to melt right before her eyes. His legs and arms became mere stumps and his head shrunk down to the size of a small apple. And all the while, he kept sweating.

In the end there was nothing left, just a large puddle on the sidewalk.

The streetlight flickered and then went out.

And then, in the dark, Sarah heard the voice again, the one from Sol's room.

"You're next," it said. "You're next."

Sarah felt a chill and then a single bead of sweat rolled down her forehead.

"Why?" she cried. "Why?"

"Because," the voice whispered. "Be—"

AAAH!

A Little Strange

The peanut butter and jelly sandwich tasted a little strange.

"Mom, I don't like this new jelly you got," Morris said. "It tastes like fishy cheese."

Just then he looked down and noticed that a corner of the sandwich was green and blue. It wasn't the jelly. It was the bread. The bread was moldy.

"Auugh," Morris said and spit out what was in his mouth. "That's gross, Mom!"

"Sorry about that, hon," she said, running over and bringing a soda. "Drink this."

Morris started watching TV and after a while forgot about the moldy sandwich.

But the next morning, Morris felt sick. He stayed in bed and didn't get up when his mom yelled that breakfast was ready.

When she went up to check on him, she didn't find him.

But there on his pillow was something that looked like a moldy orange, all black and white and green.

"I don't feel very well, Mom," the rotten fruit thing said. "I don't feel very well at all."

Morris's mom began to scream.

She couldn't stop screaming.

Morris's moldy head rolled onto the floor.

It began screaming, too.

What the Gypsy Saw

"What do you want to do?" Pedro said.

"I don't know," Barry said as he walked down the dusty street. "There's not much to do in this town."

The two young men were baseball players on the Tucson *Tuxedoes*. They were on the next to last day of a long road trip.

On their way back to the hotel, they saw a little, beat-up shack with a faded crystal ball painted on it.

"*Monica Knows All. Fortunes, $10*," a sign read. "*Money-back guaranteed*."

"Hey, how about giving the gypsy a crack?" Pedro said.

"I don't know," Barry said. "Sounds pretty stupid."

"It might be fun," Pedro said. "C'mon, I'll pay."

"Well in that case," Barry said. "Wouldn't want to discourage your newfound generosity."

They stepped inside.

"*Bienvenidos*," an old voice said. "Welcome."

When Barry's eyes adjusted to the dark, he saw an old woman sitting behind a little wooden table.

"Who's first?" she said.

"You go right ahead, big spender," Barry said and sat down on a chair in the corner.

The small, wrinkled woman could barely keep her eyes open as she turned over some cards that seemed to be as old as she was. She said Pedro would become rich and famous.

"I told you this was a good idea," Pedro said when she was finished. "It's your turn."

Barry sat down and watched as the fortuneteller looked at the cards. He was about to ask where her crystal ball was when she suddenly stood up.

"I'm sorry, I can't do this now," the old woman said in a shaky voice. "Here is your money."

She was clearly shaken, if not downright scared.

"Wait a minute," Barry said. "You saw something. What did you see?"

"Some things are better left unsaid, *señor*," she said, looking away.

"You sit back down and tell me," Barry said, getting angry. "What did you see?"

The old woman sat down and took a long breath before speaking.

"Like sand through the glass, your time ends white, black, and red," she said, her eyes filled with sadness. "Before the last out tomorrow, you will be dead."

"What's that supposed to mean?" Barry shouted.

"I am so sorry," she said. "That is all I can tell you. *Vaya con Dios*."

"C'mon, bro," Pedro said when they were back outside. "She was just having a little fun with you. Do you seriously think someone who knows the future would be living in a little shack like that in a little town like this?"

"I see your point," Barry said. "But how did she know we were baseball players?"

"Lucky guess," Pedro said.

"Yeah, lucky guess," Barry repeated nervously. "Lucky guess."

"Three homeruns?" Pedro said back at their hotel room that night after the game. "You keep hitting like that, man, and you'll be in the majors in no time."

"No time," Barry mumbled from his bed.

He had almost forgotten about what the old woman had said earlier, but now Pedro's words brought it all back.

"What's that, bro?" Pedro said and yawned.

"Like sand through the glass, your time ends white, black, and red," Barry said. "How did the rest of it go?"

"Let it go, man," Pedro said. "It didn't mean anything."

"How did it go?" Barry yelled.

"Before the last out tomorrow, you will be dead," Pedro said slowly. "But don't let it eat you up. You'll see tomorrow she didn't know what she was talking about. Get some sleep, bro."

Staring up at the black ceiling, Barry didn't answer. The old woman's words kept bouncing around in his head. What did they mean?

Like sand through the glass, your time ends white, black, and red.

Before the last out tomorrow, you will be dead.

What did it mean?

The next afternoon Barry was having another great game with four hits, including a homer. There were two outs in the bottom of the ninth and the *Tuxedoes* were leading, 5-4. The bases were loaded and the other team had their best hitter at the plate.

"Stupid old woman," Barry said, standing out in left field. "I have a mind to go over there and get Pedro's money back."

He watched as the pitcher delivered a strike. Then, as the hitter swung and missed at the next pitch, Barry felt a sharp pain in his glove hand.

A moment later he looked down and saw something big and black crawling up his arm. He heard the ball explode off the bat. The home crowd cheered wildly.

Barry swiped at the large spider with the back of his right hand, sending it spinning through the air. It seemed to twirl in slow motion. Barry let out a gasp when he saw the red hourglass on the black widow's hideously large belly.

Time sped up again and he remembered the ball, too late. When he looked up a split second later, all he saw was a giant white sphere coming right at his face, blocking out the world. There was a second explosion. And then everything turned black.

The crowd went deathly silent.

Zombie Forest

The forest closed in.
The trees started to spin.
Zombies came out.
The campers began to shout.
They made a terrible din.
An arm, a rib, a bloody shin.
A head, a toe, a hip-hip hooray.
Bleed and die to live another day.

'Round the Campfire

The nine scouts sat around the campfire with Mr. Monroe, their troop leader.

"You're the turd," little Morris Malone said.

"*You're* the turd your mama made," Milton Matthews said.

"All right, you clowns," Mr. Monroe said. "Looks like it's gonna be a cold one. I'm going to get some more firewood. Why don't you fellas take turns telling scary stories?"

He got up and disappeared into the dark forest.

"I'll go first," Manny said. "This story is called *The Hook*."

"Heard it, turd it," Morris said.

"It's not the one you're thinking of," Manny said.

"Go head on then," Matt said.

"There was this songwriter," Manny began. "His songs were okay, but they weren't catchy. They didn't have a hook. Across town there was a newspaper reporter. His stories were okay, but his first paragraphs didn't grab the readers. They didn't have a hook. In another part of the city there was a fisherman—"

Milton yawned loudly. Pretty soon they were all yawning.

Manny kept on with his story.

"Hey, guys," Marco said after a while. "Where'd Morris go?"

"I dunno," Matt said. "Maybe he had to pee."

"Morris go pee-pee," Mason said and began laughing and drooling white marshmallow foam down his chin and onto his neckerchief. "Morris go pee-pee."

Manny kept on with his story.

A while later Milton noticed that Marshall had left the circle.

"Hey, guys," he said. "Where'd Marshall go?"

"I dunno," Matt said. "Maybe he had to make potty."

"Marshall go potty," Mason said and began laughing again and drooling the white marshmallow foam. "Marshall go potty."

Undeterred, Manny kept on with his story.

Mr. Monroe still had not returned.

And then one by one, the rest of the boys—Marco, Matt, Morley, Milton, Morgan, and Mason—went off into the woods and didn't come back. There was just Manny left.

Manny kept on with his story.

Then an evil creature walked up and sat by the fire. Manny didn't notice that it was chewing on Morley's arm. The creature began listening to Manny's story.

After a while it yawned, got up, and walked back into the woods.

Manny kept on with his st—**AAAH!**

After We Die

“What happens after we die?” Julian asked.
“Don’t you know?” the voice said.
“No,” Julian said. “How would I know?”
“Because,” the voice answered, “you’re the one who’s dead.”

Bloody Larry

A few years back, on a night much like this one, I tried to make a ghost appear.

A group of us found an abandoned house and went in through a broken window. Then we sat in a circle and made up a story about a guy named Bloody Larry. Someone said that 13 years ago on this very night, Bloody Larry had died. Someone else said he had been killed upstairs by his sister. We took turns adding details like that to the story. Who he was, how his sister had killed him and why, what you had to do to make him appear, and what happened to you if he actually did appear. (I contributed that last part.)

I won't bore you with all the particulars. It was all pretty goofy really. I don't think any of us took any of it too seriously. We were just having fun.

Anyway, we started taking turns getting locked into one of the upstairs bedrooms. It was just us and a candle. According to the "story," we had to say his name 13 times.

A few of the others said they saw Bloody Larry, or saw something, when they opened their eyes. I'm not sure I believed them. They were just trying to add to the mood, was all that was.

Then it was my turn.

I climbed the creaky, old stairs and went into the room *where he had been killed*. I closed my eyes and started thinking about what story I would make up to tell the rest of them. Then I began chanting.

"Bloody Larry, Bloody Larry, Bloody Larry…" I said. "Bloody Larry, Bloody Larry, Bloody Larry, Bloody Larry, Bloody Larry, Bloody Larry, Bloody Larry, Bloody Larry, Bloody Larry, Bloody Larry."

I counted along on my fingers to make sure I was holding up my end. Thirteen times.

Nothing happened, of course. I didn't see anything. When I opened my eyes the candle seemed stronger, making everything brighter. But that was it.

There's not much more to tell.

Like I said, Bloody Larry never did appear that night.

In any case, that's what I tell people.

[Now turn and stare at someone like you are completely out of your mind. Hold the stare and say:]

I suggest you tell them the same thing.

***

It can be useful to smear some ketchup on your face prior to telling this story. Keep your face in the dark until the end. Then turn the flashlight on yourself and lunge toward some poor soul. Or if you are the techie type, maybe you can get a red filter attachment for your flashlight. Just a thought.

Campfire Thing

The flames danced in the campfire. But there was something else there among the burning colors. Something that didn't dance. Something that had no color—except for the color of death. Something that waited. Something that waited until everyone was asleep.

The Soccer Bag

The soccer bag sat in the corner of the darkened bedroom. At the far end, Olivia snored in her bed.

Suddenly the bag began to zip itself open.

The horrid smell of the sweaty mildewed socks came shooting out. The odor was so strong, it woke Olivia.

"Siiiick," she sighed, turning away.

A moment later Olivia's cleats stepped out of the bag.

"What was that?" she said.

Then the shin guards came out, followed by the socks. Then the shorts and the jersey. Finally the ball rolled out of the bag.

Nothing else happened until…

The shin guards began to rise off the floor, floating over the shoes. Then the socks. Then the shorts and above the shorts, the jersey. Then the ball suddenly flew through the air, bouncing hard against the wall over Olivia's head before taking its place above the shirt.

"What was that?" Olivia shouted.

She sat up and saw that the contents of the soccer bag had formed themselves into some sort of coat hanger figure, without the hanger.

The silhouette just floated there for a moment and then took a step toward the bed. And then another.

Olivia exploded off the bed and ran for the door.

The figure reached out a *leg*, and Olivia went down hard.

"Yellow card me if you must," it said and laughed, the muffled sound coming from inside the ball.

The thing then started kicking Olivia in the stomach and face.

"Why?" she gasped, trying to cover up, trying to understand. "Why?"

She tried to call for help but no words came out.

Kick, kick, kick. In the face. In the gut. Thud, thud, thud. In the face. In the gut. Kick, kick, kick.

Olivia would never know why.

[Curl up on the ground. Wait. Wait. Wait. And then…]

AAAH!

Leave It to Beaver

The old man was near death.

"Please," he whispered. "Give me another chance. I'll do anything. *Anything*."

Suddenly the temperature rose until the old man felt like he was inside an oven. Shades of red and orange covered the walls. The smell of sulfur filled the room.

Someone was standing in the shadows.

"It's your lucky day, my friend," a voice said. "Just sign here."

The old man could barely hold the strange pen—it looked more like a goat horn and burned his fingers—but he managed to scrawl his name on the old, parchment-looking paper.

"Good," the voice said. "Good. Now, there are some things you need to know. First, you will come back as a boy, but your face and hair will make you look like an attractive young woman. This will add to your appeal. You will become hugely popular, rich, loved, and hated. You will also have a new name. It will sound like the name of a large aquatic rodent with a flat tail. Any questions? Oh, here's what you will look like."

The old man was suddenly holding a mirror. His eyes widened in comprehension and horror.

"I've changed my mind," he said, dropping the mirror on the floor. "Anything but that. I didn't understand. Take my soul. Anything but that. Take me down there with you. Please, anything but that! I don't want to live if it means being B—"

"I'm afraid it's too late, old man," the voice said. "We had a deal. If I were you, I'd start combing my hair and practicing my, um, *singing*."

Down There

He was down there under the cold, rushing water.

His leg was trapped between two boulders. He struggled to free himself but only managed to lodge it tighter and tighter and tighter. At some point he ran out of air. He felt himself floating above the water for a short time, but then went back down.

Down, down, down.

He thought about how he should have learned how to swim or how he should have learned where not to swim or how he should have worn his life jacket or a million other thoughts that came to him too late.

He had a long time to think now.

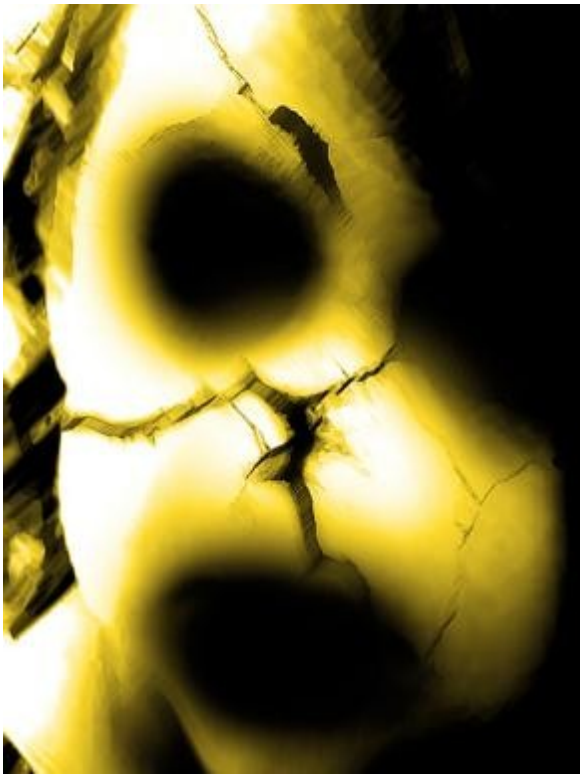
He was going to be there for a long time. He was going to be there until his skin was gone, along with his bones and every other part of him.

Until all that remained was his ghost.

Down there under the cold, rushing water.

Staring at the Sun

“Don’t stare at the sun,” the woman said.
“Why not, Mommie?” the little boy said.
“Because your eyes will catch fire,” she answered.
“You mean like this, Mommie?” he said.
She turned to look at her young son.
His eyes ran like lava down his cheeks.
“Yes, like that,” she said. “Just like that.”



"C'mon, stupid dog," Ed said under his breath. "C'mon."

"Cucho!" the little girl cried. *"Ven aqui. Cucho!"*

The Golden Retriever puppy was playing with a lizard in the middle of the street. A 16-wheeler was barreling down toward it. It didn't look like the truck was going to stop.

"Cucho!" the girl screamed.

In a flash Ed sprinted out onto the road and scooped up the little dog. Then he disappeared behind the truck and a cloud of dust.

A moment later he walked back across the street and handed the dog to the little girl.

"Gracias, señor," she said, the puppy licking the tears off her cheeks. *"Perro malo."*

"I hope you do not come to regret your kind *jester*," the old gas station attendant said later as Ed finished stocking the vending machine with sodas from his van.

"What do you mean?" Ed said.

"*El Sediento*, the Thirsty One, he no like dogs," the old man said. "And he become most *rabioso*, very angry, when people stop the killing."

"What killing?" Ed asked.

The old man explained that *El Sediento* was the ghost of a man who had lived in the village more than a hundred years earlier. One day the man was bitten by a dog with rabies. The man died a few weeks later.

"*Muy loco* in the end, he cry the saliva from his mouth and scream about the water," the old man said. "He very thirsty but also he very *afred* of *agua*, the water. After *El Sediento*, he die, all the dogs of the town begin to die as well. This village no have no dogs for 100 years now."

"That's one crazy story," Ed said.

"Is no a story, *mi amigo*," the man said. "As a child I saw *El Sediento* with my very two eyes. He kill my dog."

On the drive back toward the Texas border, Ed thought about his own dog, Cornelius, waiting for him back home. Then he heard something coming from the back of the van.

"Por favor, agua," a voice called. *"Agua, por favor. El agua noooo!"*

Ed was afraid to look in the rearview mirror, but he looked anyway.

There, behind some soda cases, was a small man with a poncho and a tattered sombrero. Great big tears spilled from his large eyes and foam covered his mouth and chin. His hand was wrapped in a bloody bandage. At first the man's expression was one of terrible suffering and terror, but then he looked right at Ed. Baring his teeth, he began to growl. His black eyes shone with a mad, evil hatred that filled the inside of the van.

The man did not speak again. He just kept growling and staring at Ed. He floated closer and closer to the driver's seat.

A loud horn got Ed's attention just in time. He had drifted over into the oncoming lane. He swerved, narrowly avoiding a crash.

When he looked back in the mirror again, the man was gone.

"That's nonsense right there," Ed said in a shaky voice as he rolled down the window. "Power of suggestion is all that is."

He took several deep breaths and began to calm down.

"That old man was pulling my leg. *El Sediento*, really? C'mon, Ed."

By the time he fell asleep that night, Ed had pretty much forgotten the whole thing. But at some point he had a terrible nightmare.

"Por favor, agua," a voice whispered in agony. *"Agua, por favor. El agua noooo!"*

The man in the poncho was sitting at the foot of the bed, his back toward Ed. He slowly turned around. Drooling, he again stared at Ed with those eyes, those black, horrible, hate-filled eyes. He pointed at Ed with his bloody hand. And then he began to float over the bed, coming closer and closer and clo—

"Aaaah!"

Ed screamed in the dark till he realized it was just a dream. He turned on the light. There was nothing there. He heard the rain pounding on the roof. He grabbed the glass of water from his nightstand and took a long drink.

In the morning Cornelius woke Ed. He was licking the foot of the bed in the spot where *El Sediento* had been in the nightmare.

"What's gotten into you, fool dog?" Ed said.

He reached down to pet the animal's head and then felt the bed. It was wet with a thick, sick-smelling foamy lather.

"Eewh, what the hell?" Ed said.

He got up, had some coffee, and changed into his running clothes.

"Let's go, Corn Dog," he called as he headed out the door.

Cornelius led the way as they ran down the desert trail.

Ed was tired but glad it was the morning. The sun was shining. He was looking forward to a new day and to putting the silliness of *El Sediento* behind him.

But as they rounded a bend through a steep section of large rocks, Cornelius stopped dead and began to whimper.

Ed stopped too and looked down at the terrified dog.

"There's nothing th—"

He suddenly felt the hairs on the back of his neck and arms stand up.

When he looked up, he saw it floating there above the trail.

El Sediento.

He pointed at Ed with his bloody hand. The eyes were blacker than ever and spilled over with malevolent venom. Ed took a step back. But it was too late. A moment later a big boulder above him loosened. There was no time to get out of the way. Ed and the dog were crushed to death.

*"Por favor, agua. Agua, por favor. El agu—**AAAH!**"*

***

Rabies kills more than 50,000 people a year, mostly in Asia and Africa. One of its symptoms is hydrophobia, in which a thirsty patient develops a fear of water because he cannot swallow as his throat muscles slowly become paralyzed.

Voodoo Doll

Drums beating. Louder and louder. Chanting. Dark curses in the night. Possessed dancing. Arms, legs, sweating, spinning. Twirling round and round. Faster and faster. Drums beating, beating, beating…

Pins reaching out for justice. Finding my skin. Piercing my skin. Stabbing me. Hurting me. Make it stop. Make it stop. Pins piercing, piercing, piercing…

Far away, far away, far away. My shadow twin screams out in pain. Piercing, stabbing, hurting. Make it stop. Make it stop. My twin closes his eyes, slumps over, and dies. And I die. I die to the sound of drums beating. I die, die, die…

Sleepover

Geraldine had an awesome time at the slumber party. There was giggling and cake and soda and plenty of talk about dreamy boys. But when she woke up, all the other girls were gone. And it was still dark. What was stranger still was that this wasn't even her house.

"Where would they have gone?" she said out loud.

Geraldine tried to remember. But she couldn't. She couldn't remember whose house it was or the names of the other girls.

"Help," she suddenly called out, gripped with panic. "Help!"

A woman dressed in white walked in the room.

"It's all right, Mrs. Nelson," the nurse said. "Did you have that dream again?"

"What dream?" Geraldine asked, looking around and seeing that she was in a hospital bed.

"The one about the slumber party," the nurse said, reaching for a diaper. "The one where you're a young girl."

The Storm

"I guess we should consider ourselves lucky," Bob said. "This thing could have hit while we were still out on the trail."

A storm was raging outside. The wet tent walls flapped in the howling wind.

"Yeah," Bo said. "We can take some comfort in being in here—until the tent rips to shreds."

"I don't think that'll happen," Ed said. "They build these things pretty good."

"We'll see," Bo said, shouting above the wind.

John was on his back with his feet up against the wall that was taking the biggest beating.

Bob said something that no one else could hear. He knew what he was trying to say but only because it was in his mind, not because he could hear himself.

"Wait, did you hear that?" Ed shouted.

"No, what?" the other three said.

"Something out there was calling my name," Ed said.

Outside and all around, only the wind could be heard.

"There it is again," Ed said.

"I don't think so," Bob said.

Suddenly Ed got up, unzipped the tent, and walked out into the storm.

"Ed!" they called. "Where are you going?"

"Maybe he had to relieve himself," Bo said. "Hope he knows better than to pee into the wind."

"Well, if he doesn't," John shouted. "He will after tonight."

The storm showed no signs of letting up.

"I think I hear it now," Bob said after a while. "It's calling me."

"C'mon, Bob," John said. "It's just the wind. Or crazy Ed messing with your head."

"No, man, it's real," Bob said.

He then got out of his sleeping bag and walked out into the storm.

"Those guys are nuts," Bo said. "I wouldn't go out there. Not in a million years."

"I hear ya," John said.

Somehow the wind began to blow even harder. Flashes of lightning lit up the night and thunder crashed overhead.

"Ed must be pretty wet by now," Bo said. "What are they doing out there?"

John didn't answer.

"John?" Bo said.

He turned and saw that John wasn't there. Bo was now alone inside the tent.

"The hell with those guys," he said.

And then he heard it. Something beyond the wind and the rain and the thunder and the lightning was calling his name.

"Booooo," it wailed. "Booooo."

"No!" Bo shouted. "I can't hear you."

"Boooooooooo," it moaned.

Bo didn't want to, but he crawled to the door and, although he *really* didn't want to, he went outside.

The sideways rain pelted his face and he had to squint to see anything.

Everything was noise and noise and noise and dark noise.

"Booooo," the voice said again. "Booooo, I'm right here."

Just then a bolt of lightning illuminated everything for a moment.

Bo couldn't believe his eyes. What he saw filled him with—**AAAH!**

Bat Cave

"Looks like Ol' Gertie died from a slow and steady loss of blood," Doc Hamline said. "See all these bite marks?"

The cow was covered with little puncture marks.

"It's them blasted bats, ain't it?" Ol' Man Dixon said.

"Afraid so," the vet said. "But your other animals seem healthy. I think they just went after Gertie here 'cause her time was nearing. She was old and weak. I don't suspect this will be an ongoing problem for you."

"You can bet the farm on that," Ol' Man Dixon said. "Them bats have gone kilt their last cow."

That afternoon the old farmer loaded up the back of his ATV with gas cans and gasoline-filled bottles. Then he headed off for the hills south of his property.

Twenty minutes later he reached a large cave.

He unloaded his supplies and took them inside. Then he poured a generous amount of gasoline just inside the opening and took a lighter to it. The inside of the cave grew as bright as day. Ol' Man Dixon could see the bats hanging from the ceiling and walls. Hundreds of them. Thousands of them.

He started lighting the rag-topped bottles and smashing them against the walls.

"Take that!" Ol' Man Dixon shouted. "And that!"

The bats, some of them on fire, began screeching and screaming around the cave. When they found the exit blocked, they panicked and started crashing into the fiery walls.

The smell of burning bats and Ol' Man Dixon's laughter filled the cave.

After a while the screaming died down.

Ol' Man Dixon threw the last bottle at the last bat, watching it dance and twitch. Then he headed toward the opening. It was still blocked by fire.

Acting like a man a quarter of his age, the old farmer suddenly somersaulted through the flames and rolled out into the sunlight.

Laughing, he swatted at his smoldering left sleeve.

That night Ol' Man Dixon was in a particularly fine mood. He brought out his best whiskey, which he only drank on the most special occasions. He even grabbed and danced with Ol' Woman Dixon around the kitchen table.

"What's gotten into you?" the old woman said, breathing hard.

"I dunno," Ol' Man Dixon said and smiled. "I reckon watching 'em varmints burn lifted my spirits a bit."

Later that night, Ol' Man Dixon woke his wife with his screams.

"Get away!" he shouted. "Get 'em off me! Get 'em off me!"

The old woman turned on the light. The old man was flailing away like he was being attacked. But there was nothing there.

"Get 'em off me! Get 'em off me!" he kept yelling.

Ol' Woman Dixon called the doctor.

By the time he got there, the screaming had stopped.

They found Ol' Man Dixon peaceful as could be. Peaceful, pale, and dead. He had been completely drained of blood.

"Strangest thing," the doctor would later say. "I can't begin to explain where all that blood went. There were no signs of internal bleeding. And there wasn't a single mark on him. And another thing: a strong sickly ammonia odor surrounded the old man. I couldn't find any explanation for that either. I can still smell it though. It almost reminded me of the time bats had invaded my attic."

"No!" Kaley yelled. "Nooooo!"

The bed beneath her was shaking uncontrollably.

"She's down here with us," a distorted voice wailed from below.

"Nooooo!" Kaley shouted.

Finally, Lucy had to stop, she was laughing so hard. She crawled out from under the bed.

Kaley was huddled against a corner, sobbing.

A moment later their mother burst into the room.

"What's all this screaming about in here?" she said. "It's bedtime."

"She was scaring me," Kaley cried. "She was making the bed move."

"All right, young lady," the mother said. "No more scary movies for you until you learn how to be nice to your little sister. And I'm not taking you to your softball game tomorrow."

Lucy made a face.

She loved watching horror movies, but this had almost been worth it. Those screams were epic. Besides, her mom would forget all about it in a few days. And softball… Well, that wasn't any big deal.

Lucy woke up thirsty later that night. She looked over at the Red Sox clock radio on her nightstand. The numbers were flashing 12:12.

Her feet felt like they were on fire. She kicked off the covers and hit something at the foot of the bed.

"Take it easy," a voice suddenly said.

Lucy sat up and noticed that there was someone sitting on the bed down by her feet. Even in the dark, she sensed that it wasn't anyone she knew. Or anyone she wanted to know. Lucy was about to scream when the voice spoke again.

"No need for that," it said. "I would only have to make you sorry. And believe me when I say that you would be very sorry."

"Who are you?" Lucy whispered. "What do you want?"

"My name is not important right now," the strange voice said. "I am on a scouting trip."

"Scouting trip?" Lucy said. "What do you mean?"

"Well, I guess you could say I'm recruiting *players* for our, um, *team*," the voice said.

"Your team?" Lucy asked. "What team?"

"Not my team," the voice said. "The Man downstairs. He sees real promise in you. He was quite taken by that little number under the bed."

"You saw that? But I was just playing around," Lucy said. "I was only having fun."

"Oh, but you see, that's our specialty," the voice said. "That's what we're all about. I can promise you that you'll have infinitely more fun with us than if you join that other team. They're such bores."

"Can I think about it?" Lucy said and yawned.

"Sure," the voice said. "No hurry. In the meantime I'll pay your sister a little visit."

"Kaley?" Lucy said. "I think you're wasting your time there."

"You're probably right," the voice said. "But those screams *were* epic. We were hoping to tempt her into joining our yell squad. Atmosphere is so important. Don't you think?"

Before Lucy had a chance to answer, the entire room was engulfed in flames. A moment later the flames were gone.

Lucy fell back asleep.

Poop Log

"Where I come from we have something called the Log of Poop," Cesc said. "Every night we feed it and cover it with a blanket. Then one day, when it is time, we throw it in the fire or sometimes simply hit it, and sing to it, and it poops out little candies and presents. We share the treats. Everyone is happy."

All was quiet for a moment, and then the class erupted in laughter.

"Now that's a very interesting tradition, Cesc," Mrs. Morris said, trying to regain control. "Thank you for sharing."

"But I'm not finished," Cesc said. "I haven't told you about the pooping statues. They are very popular."

"Maybe some other time," the teacher said quickly. "It's math time."

"That story makes me want to go to the bathroom," Marvin said.

"Can I go lie down, Mrs. Morris?" Donny said. "I'm pooped."

The class kept laughing.

"That's enough, class," Mrs. Morris said.

"Mrs. Morris, can I sit on your *stool*?" Alfred asked.

"That's it," the teacher said. "Alfred, you just lost your recess."

Alfred watched the other kids playing outside through the window. He tapped the desk angrily with his pencil.

"I'm gonna get that crappy Cesc," he said under his breath. "I'll fix him good."

After school Alfred took the long way home. He stopped in front of Cesc's house and stared. There it was out on the porch—a log with a big red happy face painted on it, covered with a blanket.

"Man, that's so stupid," he said.

He walked up quietly, making sure no one was around. Then he unzipped his backpack and placed the log inside.

When he reached the highest part of the bridge that crossed the Cornpone River, he threw the log over the side. He watched it splash and then sink under the surface. A few moments later it popped back up and floated downstream.

"Mr. Poop go bye-bye," Alfred said and laughed.

The next day Cesc looked sad.

"Hey, what's the matter, Cesc?" Alfred said after school. "You look like somebody peed all over poop log."

"As the matter of some fact…"

"Sorry, I don't have time to stand around and shoot the, uh, breeze," Alfred said. "I'm late for football practice."

"My favorite football player is Carles Puyol," Cesc called out.

"Isn't he a baseball player?" Alfred said. "Never mind, whatever."

It was dark by the time Alfred got home. His mom left him a note reminding him to take a shower and that dinner was in the fridge.

He went upstairs and took off his cleats and pads. A ghastly smell swirled around him. He sniffed his shoes and then under his arm.

"That is ripe right there, son," Alfred said. "I guess I do need a shower."

He stepped into the bathroom and turned on the light.

Something was written in brown crayon on the mirror.

"Alfred go bye-bye," it read.

Alfred reached out and touched the letters with his fingers. It wasn't crayon.

"Gross," he said. "What's going on here?"

He started to wash his hands but stopped when he heard the door slam. The bathroom was immediately filled with a horrible smell that made Alfred gag as he tried to gasp for air. He reached for the doorknob but stopped cold.

Standing there blocking the exit was the log from Cesc's house.

It wasn't smiling anymore.

The Cold Room

The room was always cold. No matter what the temperature was outside. No matter what the thermostat said. Even in the middle of summer. Even during record-breaking heat waves. The room was always cold.

Cold, cold, cold.

There were never enough blankets. There were never enough sweaters. There were never enough parkas. The heating vents pumped in no heat. The portable heaters acted like air conditioners. There were never enough blankets. There were never enough sweaters. There were never enough parkas. The room was always cold.

It was a good place to store wine. It was a good place to preserve the dead. It was a good place to see if you were as cool as McCready. It was a good place to wait on *The Thing's* next move.

The room was always cold.

Brrr. Brrr. Brrr.

The Dawn Comes Too Late

Sometimes the dawn comes too late.

Sometimes at night the thoughts grow feet and walk around.

Some mutate into worries, transforming dreams into nightmares. Others become fears and sprout dragon wings. In the dark they fly and ride roughshod over the mind.

Sometimes screams fill the night. Screams no one else hears.

Sometimes the dawn comes too late.

It Lives in the Mind

I blow in through an open window. A nostril, an ear, an uncovered yawn hole.

I do my best work in the dark. I start by sprinkling a few suggestions here and there. Small things at first. I am patient. I have time. All the time. I water and wait for my seeds to take root and grow.

"Pinch the kid sitting in front of you," I whisper. "Pinch him."

A few moments later a loud cry echoes through the classroom, telling me I have been successful.

But the teacher is on to us.

"Good," I say. "Bring it on."

Time to take it to the next level.

"Tell her her mother was a jackal," I say. "A smelly jackal."

The woman is shocked at first and cannot speak. Then she stammers something about sending us to the office.

There we sit, waiting on the principal.

I know a certain type is drawn to that job. A small mind consumed with power. Small and dark.

Why not? I ask myself.

And I can't think of one reason.

I leave the kid and enter my new host.

"Doesn't sound like you did anything wrong, Johnny," we say. "After all, her mother *was* a jackal."

We laugh and I can see the kid is baffled.

"Take the rest of the day off," we say. "You deserve it."

The kid shuffles out the door in a cloud of confusion.

"Now, pull the fire alarm," I say. "No, better yet, set fire to your own car."

The principal walks out to the parking lot.

Even before I smell the gasoline and hear the explosion, I can already tell this is going to be a good day.

Don't Kill the Messenger

"Here comes another one," Edward said under his breath. "Crazy old coots."

The old man shuffled slowly toward the row of mailboxes.

Edward had been a mail carrier for 18 years now, but he had never gotten used to the obsession old people had with mail. He knew for a fact that most of what he delivered was useless junk and that retirement checks came around the first of the month. But these people carried on like every day was Christmas or something. He wondered how they survived Sundays without mail.

Hovering, trying or not trying to contain their excitement, making small talk, smelling all nasty like.

"Good morning, Edmund," the old man said.

It's Edward, you ol' fart, Edward thought but said: "Good morning, sir."

"Mind if I check my box?" the old man said, not waiting for Edward to answer.

The key shook uncontrollably in his hand.

"Let me get that for you," Edward said. *Or else we'll be here all freakin' day.*

There was one lime green envelope in the old man's box.

"Here you go, sir," Edward said, handing over the key and the letter.

"My orders have arrived," the old man said with a strange twinkle in his eye.

He tore open the envelope.

What's this loon talking about? Edward thought as he finished putting the last of the mail into the last box.

Suddenly a terrible pain ripped through the side of his neck.

Edward reached up and felt the warm blood spilling from him. He pulled something from the wound. Dentures!

Edward collapsed down onto the sidewalk. He could see more old people heading toward him. They seemed to be moving faster than usual. Running even. Edward thought some of them were carrying knives and forks. But his mind was rapidly losing its ability to make such assessments.

The last thing he saw was the toothless old man smiling with pride.

Reunion of the Damned

"Why do we have to come here every year?" Liam asked.

"He was our father," Wyatt said.

"He was a loser," Liam said.

"I won't argue that," Wyatt said, driving up the narrow dirt path. "But he was still our father."

The car came to a stop under a large oak tree.

"You can stay if you want," Wyatt said, opening his door. "I'll be back in a few minutes."

Liam didn't say anything. He looked out the window and watched his older brother walk up to their father's tombstone. He tried to think of one good memory, but he couldn't.

The dead leaves over the grave suddenly began to dance as a gust of wind lifted them off the ground and then toward the car. They stopped just outside the passenger window for a second. To Liam it looked like the leaves had formed themselves into the shape of a man.

Then they all fell back to the ground.

"That was weird," Liam said out loud as the goose bumps shot up his arms.

A moment later a horrible smell filled the car. Without even looking, Liam knew there was now something in the back seat, something that hadn't been there just a minute before.

"You shouldn't speak ill of the dead," someone whispered in Liam's ear. "I see I still need to teach you some manners."

Liam hadn't heard that voice in years, but he recognized it instantly. Before he could get out of the car, something grabbed him from behind. He looked over and saw a gray, rotting hand on his shoulder. The skin and flesh were eaten all the way to the bone in places.

Liam screamed.

"Quiet," his father said, squeezing his fingers around Liam's neck. "You'll wake the dead. First lesson: Don't stay in the car when visiting your father's grave. Let's go."

Against his will, Liam felt himself being lifted off the seat, out of the car, and up the hill.

Back at the grave, Wyatt saw Liam coming toward him.

"Changed your mind, huh?" he said.

But Liam didn't answer.

As he came closer Wyatt could see an expression of complete horror on his brother's face. His eyes were bulging and he looked like he was trying to say something.

"What's wrong?" Wyatt asked.

Again, Liam didn't say anything. He just moved past him. It almost looked like he wasn't touching the ground.

Wyatt turned around.

"No," Liam finally said, looking at something next to him. "Nooooo!"

And then, to Wyatt's utter shock, Liam started sinking down into the ground just in front of the tombstone. Right before he disappeared completely, he screamed once again.

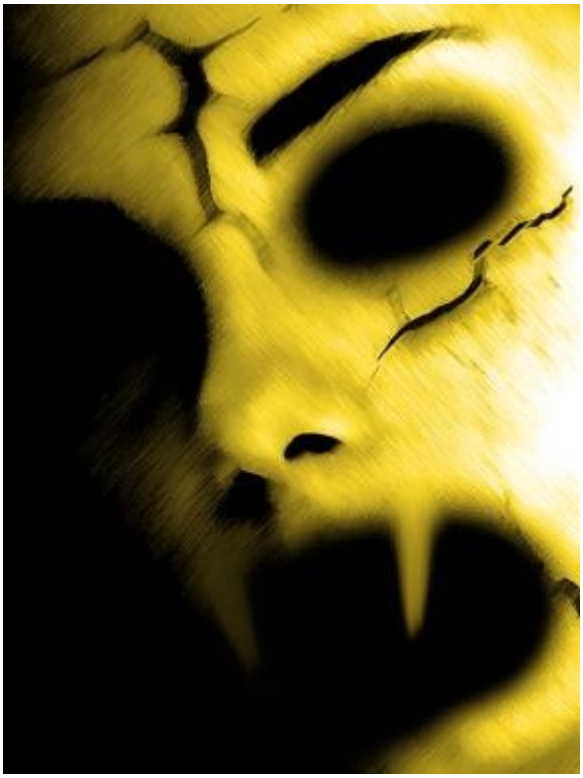
"No," he said. "Help. Help me!"

And then he was gone.

Liam was never seen again.

[Pause…]

AAAH!



Allergy Medicine

He woke up with a dead man's tongue.

It felt bone dry, like someone had ripped it from his mouth and left it to shrivel in the desert sand for several months. And then, right before the monsoons began, they had made a special trip for it and looked around for awhile, almost giving up, not recognizing it at first, confusing it with an old hairy coyote turd, and sewed it back in place.

It always tasted funny after that. But that was to be expected.

At least he had stopped sneezing.

The Flashlight

The girls took turns reading scary stories.
"My turn," Gail said, taking the flashlight and the old book.
"That's weird," she said. "This one's called *The Flashlight*."
Just then the flashlight went out. Gail played with it but couldn't get it to go back on.
"Hey," Wanda said. "I wanna know what happens."
"You want to know what happens?" a strange voice said in the dark. "*This* is what happens."
AAAH!

***

It's best, of course, to tell this story with a flashlight. No duh.

Three Animals

The cat purred.
The dog barked.
The monkey scratched your eyeballs out.

What the River Brought

Morning Man: That was Credence Clearwater Revival on WZHIT with *Who'll Stop the Rain.* The answer, boys: no one. No one will stop the rain. But we sure appreciate the thought and we certainly could use a clear water revival around these parts. Today's WZHIT question of the day: does anyone remember when it started raining? Personally, I lost track when we passed 40 days and 40 nights.

And the National Weather Service is calling for, drumroll please, wait for it, wait for it… 6-8 more inches of the wet stuff by tomorrow night.

This is your morning man, Morning Man, with the entire Morning Man crew wishing you the top of the day on WZHIT, broadcasting not so high above the ever-rising Cookoochu River and what used to be the town of Claymoresville. Hey, News Man, remember when there used to be a town of Claymoresville?

News Man: Things like streets, schools, churches, parks, gas stations, supermarkets, banks, hospitals, movie theaters, and the like? Seems like that all's been a piece of time ago right there.

Morning Man: All right, then, enough small talk. What's new this morning from the WZHIT news desk?

News Man: Our top story: Untreated sewage continues to pour into the Cookoochu River from the Harris Treatment Plant 40 miles upriver from us as the crow flies this morning. Estimates put the spill at more than a million gallons of raw human waste—with no end in sight.

Morning Man: Man, oh, man, News Man. I never thought of constipation as a good thing. Until further notice, folks, remember to eat plenty of cheese and stay away from that there fiber. We all need to do our part.

News Man: Amen to that, Morning Man. This just in: more coffins and corpses continue to wash up from the Southern Man at Rest Cemetery, which like pretty much everything else around these parts is now completely underwater.

Morning Man: I can attest to that, News Man. Paddling in to work this morning, I came across several caskets. It's gotten to the point where I don't think twice on it. You know, some of them modern coffins are surprisingly seaworthy, but those older, pine models are no match for the force of the wa—

News Man: Sorry to interrupt, Morning Man. We have breaking news. There are unconfirmed reports of… No, this has to be someone's idea of a sick joke. I should wait for WZHIT's own Reporter Man to verify this.

Morning Man: What is it, News Man? Don't keep the good folks in the dark now.

News Man: All right, Morning Man. But please remember that these reports are unconfirmed. Reporter Man is on his way to the scene as we speak to get to the bottom of this. But we have unconfirmed reports that some of the bodies floating downriver are… are... are… coming back to life. If these reports are to be believed, the dead are swimming to shore and walking on the land.

Morning Man: That can't be, News Man. It just can't be. I have some people buried up there. Wait. I understand we have a caller on the line with a similar story. Caller, are you there?

Caller: Yes, I am here.

Morning Man: Please tell us your name and why you're calling.

Caller: My name is Randall. Randall B. Frank. I am calling because it's like News Man there says. Seen it for myself. First the river changed color from gray to a chocolate color and the smell was something awful. And a few minutes later, they started coming out. Covered in mud or what have you, the corpses just came out of the water. They just stood there for a while, gathered in a circle, and then they started heading in the direction of Cherry Hill.

Morning Man: Cherry Hill, you say? That's where we are. How many are there, Randall? What else can you tell us?

Caller: Never was too good at 'rithmetic, but I would say at least 50. And more all the time. The others wait around and when there's a group of 'em, they head off in some direction or another. They don't seem the same as you and me. Slower. Not sure how much of their minds are still there.

News Man: Morning Man, I've got university professor George Mason on the line. Professor, can you tell us what you know?

Professor: I don't know much. You called me. I can tell you that George Mason is the name of the university. My name is LaFontaine. Dr. Franz LaFontaine.

News Man: Dr. LaFontaine then. Doctor, what do you think is causing the dead to come back to life down here on the Cookoochu River?

Professor: I have no idea. I do not even know for a fact that any such thing is taking place.

Morning Man: Morning Man here, doctor. Do you think it could have something to do with all that raw sewage spilling into the river and mixing with the corpses?

Professor: I would not rule it in or out. I would first need to collect evidence.

Morning Man: Thank you, professor. And thank you, Randall.

News Man: Morning Man, we now have a report from Reporter Man. Reporter Man, what can to tell us? Go ahead, Reporter Man.

Reporter Man: Thank you, News Man. This is Reporter Man reporting for WZHIT News live and direct from the rain- and sewage-swollen Cookoochu River. I can tell you, News Man, that the dead indeed seem to be returning to life. A large group of these, these creatures has blocked off the road I was on. I am now getting out of the WZHIT News Van and walking up to meet them. See if I can get some interviews.

Morning Man: Watch yourself out there, Reporter Man.

Reporter Man: Thanks for your concern, Morning Man. But they don't seem to be dangerous. Let's see if I can get them to say something for you.

Sir, how does it feel to be alive again? Where are you heading? What's your purpose here today?

Unidentified Garbled Voice: Questions. Questions. More questions than worms.

Reporter Man: Ma'am, what can you tell us? How does it feel to— Hey! Let go of my arm! No, no, no! They've surrounded me, Morning Man. Oh, the smell. Save yourselves. Save your—

News Man: Reporter Man. Are you there, Reporter Man? Reporter Man?

Unidentified Voices: Reporter Man have no more questions. Or arms. Or legs. Or—

News Man: Reporter Man!

Morning Man: News Man, you keep trying to reach Reporter Man. We go now to a caller right outside the studios of WZHIT. Go ahead, caller.

Caller: Hi. My name is Rachel Eldridge. These dead things are heading right toward you. Toward me. I'm getting out of here! I suggest you do the same.

Morning Man: Rachel? Are you there, Rachel?

[Sound of loud pounding.]

News Man: Did you here that, Morning Man?

Morning Man: Sounds like it's coming from out front.

News Man: I'm gonna go take a look.

Morning Man: Keep me posted, News Man. In the meantime, let's do a quick recap for those of you just tuning in. We have reports, confirmed now, that dead bodies floating on the Cookoochu River have come back to life and are now roaming the hills west of what used to be Claymoresville. These *things* seem to be violent. I repeat: they are violent. Use extreme caution. A large group of them appear to be right outside our studios here at WZHIT.

News Man: Morning Man, can you hear me? Are you there, Morning Man?

Morning Man: Go ahead, News Man. Why are you whispering?

News Man: They've broken in, Morning Man. The smell is indescribable. There must be more than 30 of them. And they're heading your way. I'm going to try and— No. They've seen me. Ah! Ah! Aaaah!

Morning Man: News Man? News Man? I see them. I can see News Man now too. They've surrounded him. I can't see him anymore. They're coming down the hall now. Nothing between me and them except a little cheap plywood door and a piece of glass. I seem to be up that WZHIT creek without a paddle, folks.

I think they see me. I'll try to give you as many details as I can in hopes that it may help someone out there. I wish I could tell you what they want. They seem to be focused on me right now. They are slow. [Sound of glass breaking.] It's been a few years since I ran cross country back at Smith High. Still, I wish this place had a back door.

Maybe I can stand on the desk and climb up there above those tiles. Here goes nothing.

Uugh. Al…most there. No! Let go! They've got my right leg. They're pulling me down.

No! No! Wait. Auntie Esther, is that you? Auntie Esther…

Noooooo!

Not Scary Enough

Mark's dad closed the book.

"All right," he said. "Now it's time for bed."

"That story wasn't scary," Mark groaned. "It was lame."

"Okay," his dad said. "What would you do to make it scary?"

"I would make it bloody," Mark said. "And cut off the boy's head."

His dad was quiet for a time and then nodded in a strange way. Suddenly he started shaking and his skin began to shrivel and peel off. In a few moments his body was a bloody pulp with bones and organs showing through. The thing sitting on the bed wasn't Mark's dad anymore.

It grabbed Mark's terrified face between its hands. Then it laughed and pulled and pulled and pulled until something broke loose. Blood squirted all around the room in great, awesome jets. Something fell and rolled across the floor.

Mark looked back at his headless body and tried to scream.

"Like that?" the thing asked. "Is that better?"

They're Coming For You

They're coming for you.
Oh, wait.
They're already here.
AAAH!

They're Coming For You 6
Scary Stories that Scream to be Read

by

O. Penn-Coughin

Copyright © 2011 O. Penn-Coughin

YOU COME TOO Publishing

They're Coming For You 6 6 6
O. Penn-Coughin
Scary Stories that SCREAM to be Read

Introduction

As always, these stories are meant to be read out loud. **[Instructions are included where necessary—mostly in the form of a good "AAAH!"]**

Also, as always, most of these tales are very short. Sometimes this is referred to as flash or sudden fiction. In this case, we might call it *fright fiction* or *sudden death fiction*.

And finally, as always, it's all for fun and it's all for you.

Sweet screams!

O. Penn-Coughin

The Neighbor

Their neighbor was kind of strange.

They had moved in almost six months ago but the skinny old man still got their names wrong.

"Hello, Wendy," he would say to Ruth. "Wait, you're not Wendy."

Ruth didn't know who Wendy was.

Hello, Edward," he would say to Mark. "Wait, you're not Edward."

Mark didn't know who Edward was.

"Wendy and Edward," he said one day. "I'd like to invite you over for dinner."

"That's very nice of you," Mark said. "But—"

"We'd love to," Ruth said.

"Tomorrow night then," the old man said.

"Why did you say yes?" Mark said when they were back inside their house.

"Oh, he just looks so lonely," she said. "And he seems to have gotten paler and skinnier since we last saw him. Having company might help his appetite."

"All right," Mark said. "But there's something about him that gives me the creeps."

They brought over a bottle of wine and dessert. Good thing too, because the old man's idea of dinner was a foul-tasting, watery broth.

"I'll get dessert," Ruth said after they ate, heading toward the kitchen.

"Good," Mark slurred, slumping in his chair. "I could *uze zome*."

Ruth wondered what was wrong with him. He had only had a few sips of the wine. But she felt strangely dizzy too.

She sliced the apple pie and looked for the ice cream in the large freezer. There were some strange-looking large bones inside.

No, it can't be, Ruth thought. *That one looks like a human skull*.

"I'm afraid that's what's left of Wendy and Edward," the old man said, walking in on her. "They were my neighbors before you came along. Only good for soup now."

"Why?" Ruth said, leaning against the counter.

"Man's gotta eat," he said. "I don't know what I would have done if you hadn't accepted by invitation."

"You put something in that broth," she said, sliding down to the floor.

"It's best that way," he said. "I promise you won't feel a thing."

She was already sleeping. The old man began to drool. He put on his apron and thick rubber gloves and began working.

"It hurts," the ghostly child cries. "It huuuuurts!"

"Do try to be brave," the nurse says. "It's not that bad."

"But it hurts. Wait. What was that?"

"That's not going to work. Close your eyes and count to ten."

"No, really, I think someone else is here."

"You're right. What do we have here? I think you might have a visitor."

"A visitor! A visitor! I do so love visitors."

[Now turn to someone and, using an evil nurse voice, say:]

"Wait, it's not a visitor, it's **[insert person's name]**. Where have you been? Oh, never mind. You're back just in time for your shot. I promise it will only hurt… while you're alive."

AAAH!

Johnny Wrote a Monster

"I'm gonna win that contest," John Fontaine said.

"No doubt that's a sweet prize," Donald said. "But there are more than 100 kids in the fourth grade. Way more. Those aren't good odds."

"I don't care," John said. "I'm gonna write the scariest story and I'm gonna win that prize."

The new principal had announced earlier that day that each upper grade was having a writing contest. The top story from each class would be read during a special assembly and a group of parents and teachers would vote on first place. First prize was $100.

The theme was horror, but the story wasn't supposed to be gory.

"A minimum of blood and no slasher stuff," the principal had said during morning announcements. "Points will be deducted for gore. Lots of points."

There was a loud moan from a lot of the boys in John's class. But not John. He just wanted to win. If a bloodless story was going to get it done, that was fine by him. Just as long as he won.

John hurried home and started working on his story.

He paced around the room, working out the details out loud.

"Okay, there's this guy and he turns into a monster. He's got fire pouring out of his eyes. And he burns up everyone he sees. No. Too violent.

"Okay, there's this guy and he can make people's heads burst like pumpkins on the pavement just by thinking about it. No, too brainy and bloody. Can't have brain goop flying through the air. That would probably qualify as gore in the judge's eyes.

"Focus, John. Okay, there's a thing that crawls out of a circus tent. It's a cross between a lion and clown. A Clion. No, too stupid.

"Okay, there's a spaceship from another world and in this world the people have two heads, one on each knee and up above their necks there's a piñata. No, no, no."

He let out a long sigh. This was going nowhere. And then he got an idea. A real idea.

"Okay, there's a bloodless ghoul going around sucking the blood out of anyone he comes near. Except there's not a drop of blood in the whole story. Okay, what happens to the blood? It dries up in the atmosphere. No. Okay, it gets sucked into the ghoul. The ghoul's like a black hole and the blood is just gone, leaving behind shriveled-up corpses. So maybe he's a red hole. Yeah, that's it. 'A minimum of blood.' That's it!"

He pumped his fist in the air.

"I'll call it *The Red Hole* or *The Bloodless Ghoul*. Yes, yes, yes! I believe we have our winner."

John paused and looked out at the crowd. They were eating out of his hand like they were zombies and he was feeding them fresh brains. Then he hit them with the big finish.

"James knew there was nothing he could do. The bloodless ghoul closed in, its eyes red and evil. James felt the blood leaving his body, like air leaving a balloon. One drop at a time. James crumbled to the ground, pale and lifeless and dead. Dead, dead, *dead*. The end."

There were some *oohs* followed by wild clapping and cheering.

I've done it, John thought. *I've won*.

But John didn't win. First place went to MacKenzie Dewitt, a girl, for something she called "The Shroud of Farmer Gwynn."

The Shroud of Farmer Gwynn? Who talks like that? What's a shroud anyway? John said as he kicked a can down the sidewalk. That story was so not scary. I was robbed.

"I couldn't agree more," a voice suddenly said. "You had my vote."

John turned and looked around. His eyes just about popped out of his head. Standing there right next to him was the ghoul from his story.

"Hold on now," it said. "I know what you're thinking. And you're wrong. You didn't create me. I'm not really a bloodless ghoul. Okay, technically I'm somewhat of a bloodless ghoul. At least I'm bloodless. Ghoul is a more difficult term to pin down. If by ghoul you mean demon, I suppose I could loosely be called a bloodless

ghoul. In any case, I enjoyed your story. I mean, it wasn't that scary, but it did give me an idea of what to be for Halloween."

"But it's not Ha-Ha-Ha-Halloween," John stammered.

"I was just taking it out for a test drive. Demons need practice too, you know. But I can tell you right now that I'm not going to stick with that *one drop at a time* business," the demon said. "I don't have to play by those rules."

Then he smiled, holding out his hand and bringing his fingers together in a turning motion.

John felt a strange pressure building inside him.

A moment later all the blood in his body exploded out of him.

The Blue Boy

The lake was supposed to be haunted. Over the years, several people had died there under unexplained circumstances. Some had gone mad.

They said the *L*-shaped body of water was cursed by the ghost of a boy who had drowned while ice fishing more than 50 years earlier. It was early spring when the thin ice had cracked under his feet.

They never found the body.

"Where you headed?" the old man at the general store asked.

"Up to the lake," Mano said, signaling with his chin.

"Dead Boy Lake?"

"Yep."

"Wouldn't advise it," the man said, putting the container of worms into a brown paper bag. "It's haunted, haven't ya heard?"

"As long as it's haunted by fish," Mano said.

"I knew him. Back when he was a boy, I mean. Name was Dave. Nice kid. These days they call him *Blue Boy*. Hear he's not so nice anymore."

Mano nodded and took his worms and his change.

"Watch yourself now," the old man said, lighting a cigarette and squinting out the window.

Half an hour later Mano was sitting in his canoe, casting his line into the water. He had the place to himself.

Mano never had a better day. It was as if the trout had been waiting for him all their lives. They went for the worms like flies on molasses, impaling themselves on the hook. Mano wanted to stop—he had more fish than he could eat in a month—but he couldn't. And neither it seemed could the trout.

So there he sat, casting and reeling, casting and reeling, until his ice chest was overflowing with the flapping fish. Then the breeze started to pick up. And then between the sound of his reel and the wind, Mano thought he heard something else.

"*Save soooome for meeee*," a far off voice called.

Mano paid it no mind. He just kept fishing.

Finally, he decided to call it a day. He sadly placed his rod inside the canoe and paddled back to shore. He loaded the back of the SUV with his silver-scaled treasure and secured the boat to the roof. Then he slid in behind the wheel.

"Hell of a day," Mano said.

"*Hell of a day*," a gurgling voice repeated.

The sound was coming from the passenger seat.

The car was suddenly filled with a smell that made the vomit, green and gooey, come up in Mano's throat. He turned slowly. Sitting there was a small boy, his skin wet and pale blue. At first he began to gasp and cough up water, and then a thick black froth bubbled from his mouth.

The boy turned toward him and Mano saw that he had no eyes—just dark empty holes that disappeared into the back of his skull. He smiled at Mano through yellowish-green, rotting teeth.

"*Thanks for saving soooome for meeee*," he murmured.

The *Blue Boy* reached out his arms and pulled Mano in.

"*Now, give me sooome*," he whispered.

Then he kissed Mano on the lips. As his world went blue and black, Mano felt his heart stop. And then he felt nothing.

AAAH!

Your Mother's Back

"Ouch."

The faraway, angry voice came from down in the crack on the sidewalk. Larry stopped and turned around.

"What was that?"

"It's true I've been dead for a while now, Larry," the old voice said, sounding closer and angrier. "But *that* still hurts."

"Who's down there?" Larry said, getting scared.

"Why, it's me, Larry."

"I'm sorry," he cried. "I didn't mean it."

Suddenly the ghost of Larry's dead mother shot up out of the crack. She floated in front of his face and stared at him for a moment with hateful, beady eyes. Then she grabbed Larry by the throat. She spun him around and kicked him hard in the spine, like she had been training with Bruce Lee.

Larry heard a crack and felt a terrible bolt of pain and then everything went all Hong Kong Phooey.

"See what I mean, Larry?" the ghost shrieked, hovering over Larry's broken body. "See what I mean?"

The Room at the Top of the Stairs

The room at the top of the stairs never felt right. Janet knew there was something there. Something that didn't want them there. Or maybe it was just the opposite. Something that wanted them there too much. Something that wanted them there for the wrong reasons.

Even her dad, who didn't believe in ghosts or anything remotely paranormal, was spooked by it.

"That would be a perfect place for your office," Janet's mom had said to him when they first moved in to the old house.

But instead he picked a claustrophobic little spare bedroom with no windows. Whenever anyone asked why he wasn't using the brightly lit attic to do his writing, his pride wouldn't allow him to tell the truth—that there was something there that scared him, too. He just made up some excuse.

But Janet knew.

She had only been in the room twice, three years ago when they had just moved in. It was cold in there. Even though it was the middle of summer and the rest of the house was warm. Heat was supposed to rise. It shouldn't have been cold. But it was cold. So cold.

The second and last time she had felt something brush her hair. And then she heard someone whisper her name.

"Janet. *Janet*."

She turned around but no one was there.

She never spoke of it and never went back. She liked the rest of the house just fine. It was a happy place and she felt safe in it. Most of the time she didn't think about the room. Sometimes weeks and months went by without her even remembering it was there.

And then one afternoon in early December Janet found herself alone in the house. The days were growing shorter and shorter. It was just past four and it was already getting dark.

She suddenly heard Boris meowing loudly.

The sounds were coming from upstairs. From up in that room.

And it wasn't a normal meow. It was the kind of freaky meow that told her that something was wrong. The cat was in trouble.

"How did he get in there?" Janet said out loud, the words trembling out her mouth.

As she stood at the foot of the stairs, the cat's howling got louder and more frantic.

Janet climbed the squeaky steps slowly, walked down the short little hall, and paused in front of the door.

The cat was hissing now.

"Damn it," she said.

She turned the door knob. It was dark in the room, the attic facing away from the day's last rays of sunlight. Janet flicked on the light switch but nothing happened.

Bulb must have burned out, she thought.

"Boris," she called, still standing by the door. "Come here, Boris."

The cat's meowing had stopped. It was now as quiet as snow falling on a grave in there. Janet took a few steps toward the center of the room.

"Boris. I'm right here," she said, shivering.

The room was colder than ever. Janet could see her breath escaping out in shallow, uneven bursts.

Suddenly the cat exploded across the dark wood floor, crashed hard into her shin, and flew out into the hall.

Janet turned to leave. And then she heard it again.

"*Hello, Janet*," the voice whispered in her ear. "*I've been waiting for you*."

Then the door slammed shut.

Janet felt it close in all around her. She tried to scream. Instead, laughter—like nails across a chalkboard—filled the room.

When Janet's parents got home they didn't find her. They assumed she went over to a friend's house and forgot to leave a note. When they still hadn't heard from her a few hours later, her mom called Janet's number.

They heard the faint ringing of the phone coming from somewhere in the house. It was coming from upstairs. From up in the attic.

"That's strange," her mother said.

Janet's father raced up the stairs and threw open the door. The phone was in the center of the floor, still ringing and giving off light from its screen.

"Janet, are you in here?" he said. "Janet?"

He scanned the room and saw her. She was huddled in a corner, hugging her knees to her chest.

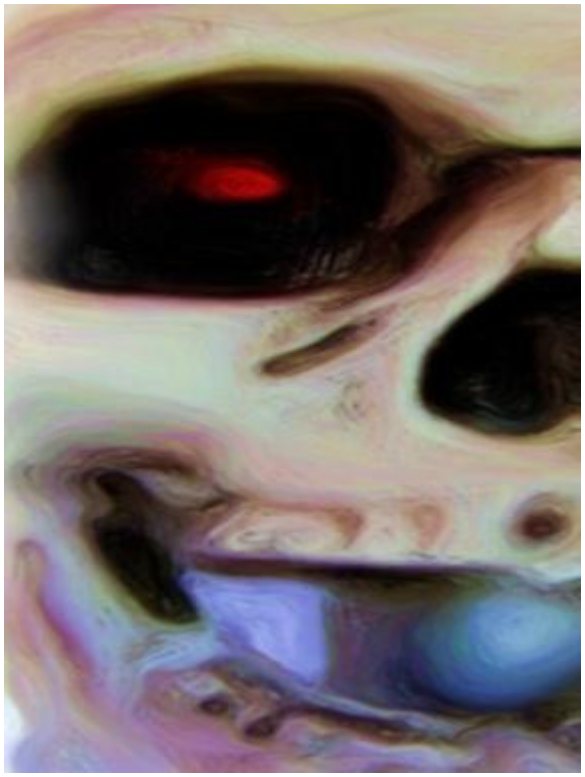
Her father helped her up and walked her outside into the small hall.

When she saw her, her mother screamed and then fainted.

Janet's hair had turned *white as snow*.

Won't Get Ghouled Again

Aaaaaaaaaaaah!!!



Cookies

February 9…

It is a beautiful late February day that whispers of spring and all the things that spring brings. An almost warm breeze blows down the street.

Not much longer now, I tell myself. The snow will soon be gone.

"Excuse us, Mister?" a small voice suddenly says from behind me.

At first I ignore it. No one has ever called me mister.

"Mister?"

I stop and turn around.

There are two little girls standing there. They carry a large cardboard box that is almost bigger than they are.

"What's in the box?" I say.

"Cookies," one says. "Would you like some?"

"No, thanks," I start to say.

And then, why not? I think. I love cookies.

"Yes," I say. "Yes, I would."

I end up buying five boxes.

They are delicious.

February 12…

I am sick. Terribly sick. Something wrong with my stomach. It pours out of me from both ends. Ever since the cookies.

Thinking back, there was something strange about those girls. Shouldn't they have been wearing uniforms? And the way they smiled after they handed me those boxes. There was something not quite right in those smiles. Sinister. Almost evil.

I don't even think I paid them.

It had to be something in the cookies. I can't think of what else it could be.

I will go to the doctor if I don't improve soon.

February 13…

Terrible sounds explode out of me. Sometimes it sounds… like words.

"Too late for you. Warn the others!"

Looking at these words I can only conclude I have a raging fever and am out of my mind.

Strange then how my cheek is cold to the touch. Ice cold.

February 15…

I feel better. Much better.

It's rainy and cold but I don't care. I almost feel back to my old self.

The muddy, foul river that poured out of me has finally dried up. I am still weak, but that will pass. For the first time in days, I am hungry.

February 16…

There is a knock at the door. I look through the peephole and see the little cookie girls standing there. When I open the door, Roland is there alone. I stick my head out and look up and down the hall. Empty.

"Where'd they go?" I say.

"Where'd who go?" he says.

"Oh, never mind."

"Ready?"

"Ready for what?"

"C'mon, man. You're the one who called me and asked if I wanted to play some handball."

Handball? I don't remember calling him or saying anything about handball.

"Sorry. I must still be weak, man," I say. "I'm gonna have to pass."

"Whatever," he says, walking away.

A minute later there is another knock.

Roland is back.

"Ready?" he says.

"Didn't we just go over this?" I say.

"Go over what? What are you talking about?"

He is serious.

"Forget it," I say. "What's up?"

"Handball? You asked if I wanted to play."

Something is going on. Something weird.

February 16…

I see the little girls in a dream. They smile again the way they had that day. That's all. But something about them fills me with dread. A dread that stays with me the rest of the sleepless night.

February 17…

I finally go back to school today. I get there early. I sit in the empty classroom for a long time, wondering where everyone is. And then I realize it's Sunday.

February 20…

"Hey, why did you push Nate into the street?" Roland asks. "If that car hadn't stopped—"

"What are you talking about?"

He tells me. Reminds me, looking at me the whole time like I am crazy. Apparently I shoved Nate into the street yesterday during cross country. We were just returning to campus after a 10-miler. I don't know why I would do that.

"You had a terrible expression on your face," Roland says. "And then it was like you weren't even there."

I've never had a problem with Nate. But I don't know why Roland would lie about it either. I believe him, and yet… I have no recollection of any of it.

I can only conclude that the illness is not through with me. It's moved up, leaving my bowels and affecting, infecting my brain.

I start to sweat.

This isn't just a little lapse in memory. I'm starting to become dangerous.

Am I going mad? Maybe it wasn't the cookies. Maybe it was bad meat. I promise that if this goes any further, I will tell someone and have them put me somewhere. Somewhere where I can't hurt anyone.

February 21…

My only hope is to find those girls. I am convinced of it. They must have an antidote. They must.

February 23…

I see the little girls again tonight. They are in the corner by the closet. They are eating something. Not cookies. Blood is running down their chins. They giggle.

The room is completely dark. And yet I see them. I turn on the light and there, of course, is nothing there. I stay up the rest of the night, afraid they will return, wondering what they were eating.

They do not come back.

February 24…

I wake up from a dream as if I had stepped out of the shower. Everything is wet. I remember nothing, no details, just the words.

"Warn them! Warn them!"

February 26…

I find myself staring out the window, looking down at the students walking by. There is a twisted smile on my lips and a freshly carved jack-o-lantern in one hand and a long sharp knife in the other. I have never seen either before and do not know where they came from and what I am doing. Where a pumpkin in February came from I don't know. Nor can I tell you the thoughts behind that smile.

I am going mad. There is no other explanation. And it is not a flowers and pastel pleasant kind of madness. It is dark and dangerous. And I feel there is no coming back from it.

February 27…

I will try one thing and then I will turn myself in.

I am convinced that those girls are the cause of it all. I must find them. They are the key. Maybe I am wrong. Maybe there is still hope for me. Perhaps they know of a cure and even possess an antidote.

Yes, I will find them and everything will be better.

February 28…

I walk all the streets of this small town at least four times each. There is no sign of them.

There is no hope.

I feel the sickness growing inside me. Taking me over.

Tomorrow I will go to the hospital.

February 31… (I know that where you are there is no such date as February 31. But I no longer inhabit the place where you are.)

I have found them. I have found them! Or rather they have found me. It doesn't matter.

They are here and everything will be all right now.

I walk up to them and ask them.

"What was in those cookies?"

"Everything," the one says.

"What is that supposed to mean?"

"Everything is everything," she repeats.

"Everything awful, everything horrible, everything sick. All the vile things," the other one says. "They were all in there."

"But why?"

"Because it's what we do," the first one says. "Don't you have things you do?"

I ignore the question.

"Is there a cure?" I ask. "There must be a cure."

"Not really," the second one says. "Except for—"

She smiles at me and then at the other one and then they both smile at me. They bare their sharp fangs. They lunge toward me. I push them away but they rip off my left arm. They laugh. I can somehow feel the pain in my forearm as I watch them pull at the flesh with their teeth.

I stagger behind the bed, the blood leaving me. At least I know I have not imagined them. My heart pumps weakly, faintly, for the last few times and is comforted by the thought that they are real. At least that much is true. I have been forgetful and thought and done evil things, but they are the cause of it and they are real.

I can barely feel my pulse now. I can barely hold the pen I'm writing these words with. I hear them coming. I hear their heinous, girlish giggles. They are coming to finish me off. They'll come for you next.

Don't eat the cookies.

Whatever you do, don't eat the cookies. Do you hear me?

DON'T EAT THE COOKIES!

Shell Shock

"What's that?" Sally said.

"Probably just the icemaker," Brittney said. "It's been running a little loud lately."

Sally walked to the refrigerator. Another explosion rocked the kitchen. She opened the freezer.

"There aren't even any cubes in here," she said.

The next jolt almost knocked her down.

"It seems to be coming from down in the main compartment."

"Wait for me," Brittney said.

She rushed to the kitchen.

Sally opened the refrigerator door.

There were cracked egg shells everywhere. And there were things inside, live things, horrible things, things that weren't baby chicks, things that didn't resemble anything they had ever seen… things that came after them.

Things that cracked some skulls and made an omelet out of Sally's and Brittney's brains.

The Head of Teddy Ballgame

Josh, Jon, and John were sitting around the clubhouse playing video games and drinking beer.

"You know when the season's over, we should go on a road trip to the desert and break out Teddy Ballgame," Josh said.

"Well, the way we've been pitching that should be sooner rather than later," Jon said. "I doubt we'll make the playoffs."

Outside the crowd booed as the team lost yet another game.

"Pass me that bucket of chicken," John said, belching.

Jon was right. The team blew a nine-game lead in the final month of the season and failed to qualify for the postseason.

A week after the season ended, the three pitchers were far away from sad, chilly Boston, playing round after round of golf under the Arizona sun and sitting around the pool.

"You ready for tomorrow night?" Jon said. "The security guard will be expecting us."

"I reckon so," Josh said. "How much is this going to cost us anyway?"

"A couple of tickets behind the first base dugout to a game next season and an all-expenses weekend trip to Beantown."

"This one's on me," John said, smiling. "After all, I made 16.5 million dead presidents last year."

"You pitch like a dead president," Josh said. "Hey, wasn't your ERA 16.5?"

"Takes one to know one," John said. "Anyway, I'll be that one you see crying… all the way to the bank."

"All right, all right," Jon said. "Tomorrow night we set Teddy Ballgame free."

Teddy Ballgame had been one of the most famous players in team history and one of the greatest hitters in the history of baseball. When he died his family had his head frozen in hopes that he could be brought back to life one day. But according to his oldest daughter, this went against his wishes. She said Teddy Ballgame just wanted to be cremated and his ashes scattered at sea.

"I'm playing an old video loop for the cameras," the security guard said. "But after 10 minutes I've got to go back to the live feed, so set your watches and don't be late. Oh, and you're looking for the container marked *A-1949*. *A-1949*. Got it?"

"*A-1949*. Got it," Jon said. "Thanks, buddy."

"It's wicked cold in *hee-ah*," Josh said a minute later. "Wait a minute. Why am I talking that way? I'm from Texas."

The three looked around the room. There were a few large containers that housed whole bodies. Mostly, though, it was heads. There seemed to be more than 100 corpses in all.

"Why just the heads?" John asked.

"This stuff is expensive," Jon said. "I guess most of these folks figured they'd freeze their most important part—their brains."

"I guess they won't be preserving *your* brain," Josh said, turning toward John. "Or your right arm."

"Shut up," John said.

"Man, that's so wrong," Josh said. "They've got his head in a lobster pot."

John started laughing.

"Keep it down, you idiots," Jon said.

"Look," Josh said a few minutes later. "Here it is."

They removed the lid from the silver canister.

John stared down at the head.

"Are you sure that's him," he said. "That doesn't look like Teddy Ballgame."

"It's the number the guard gave us," Jon said.

“Well, he has been dead for a while now,” Josh said. “Plus he’s frozen. I’d expect he would look a little different.”

“All right,” Jon said. “Josh, you hold the container and I’ll lift him out. John, you hold open the bowling ball bag.”

“Okay, but move it along,” John said. “We’re running out of time.”

Jon lifted the head carefully out of the container.

“We’re here to take you home, Teddy,” Josh whispered.

Suddenly the head flew out of Jon’s hands. It floated and hovered in midair and slowly opened its eyes.

“I’m not going anywhere,” the head said.

“But we came to rescue y-y-y-you,” Jon said.

“There’s nothing I’d like more than to feel myself drifting down to the Caribbean on those warm waters,” the head of Teddy Ballgame said. “But what you boys did wasn’t right. Somewhere along the line you stopped caring. You stopped caring about the game. And from where I float, that’s a mortal sin.”

“This is nuts!” John shouting, his eyes bulging like cheeky wads of tobacco.

“I’m not the only Sox fan in here either,” the head said. “We’re gonna teach you a lesson you won’t soon forget. Get ‘em, boys.”

The lids popped off a few of the other containers. Before they knew what was happening, the three ballplayers were surrounded by several frozen bodies and floating, angry heads.

“No!” Josh screamed. “Nooo!”

“This can’t be happening,” Jon yelled.

“We’re sorry,” John whimpered, a puddle spreading down at his feet. “We’re so sorry.”

A few minutes later they found themselves inside one of the large canisters. The frozen liquid nitrogen closed in all around.

They were colder than any of them had ever been in their entire lives. John’s lips turned purple. Josh’s eyeballs froze. Jon’s brain cracked and popped.

“Three hundred and twenty-one degrees below zero is no laughing matter,” the head of Teddy Ballgame said, chuckling. “Oh, wait, maybe it is.”

“Hahahahahahahahaa,” the other frozen bodies and angry heads laughed. “Ahahahahahahahaa!”

“Maybe it is.”

Smiles All Around

The house stood on the edge of town. No one had lived in it for a long time. Not since that October night in 1964 when the stepmother visited the children one by one in their rooms.

They must have known something was wrong by the way she smiled. After all, she never smiled.

The neighbors said they didn't hear any screams. But there must have been screams. How could there not have been screams? *How on earth could there not have been screams?*

AAAH!

Better.

AAAH!

AAAH!

Much better.

AAAH!

Yes. Oh, Yes.

The Voice Inside

The voice had always been there inside her head for as long as Sarah could remember.

At first she worried that there was something wrong with her. But she soon realized that everyone had that voice inside them. It was that little devil that sat on your shoulder, counseling you to do bad things. They even made cartoons about it. Except that Sarah didn't have an angel sitting on the other shoulder. It was always just her own small voice she heard telling her to do the right thing.

But as Sarah got older, the voice of evil inside her head—which had started out as a very faint whisper—grew louder.

"Rip the head off your brother's G.I. Joe. Boys shouldn't play with dolls anyway."

"Pull that girl's hair. You know you want to."

"Lie to your mother. She doesn't need to know."

"Skip school today. Believe me, you won't miss a thing."

"Shoot that grizzly bear! *Shoot it*."

Sarah did a good job of ignoring the voice, but it was getting harder and harder.

She began talking to herself. At first it was when no one was around. But then it started happening all the time: during dinner, in class, with her friends.

"No, I won't do that!"

"I'm not going to say that."

"Leave me alone! Leave me alone!"

By the time she was in high school, Sarah had lost all her friends. They all thought she was just too weird. And not in a funny or cool way either. There seemed to be something seriously wrong with her.

Sarah's parents took her to a psychologist, but it didn't help. She refused to talk to him.

"Go ahead and bare your feelings, Sarah," the voice said, chuckling. "I doubt it will do any good."

"Stop laughing at me!"

Soon Sarah became deaf to anything that wasn't the voice. She couldn't hear birds chirping or music playing or people talking. And then one day, she couldn't even hear herself. Sarah didn't hear a sound when her spirit finally shattered into a million pieces

"Do I have your attention now?" the voice screamed. "Good. Mmmm... Good."

Sarah could only cry and nod her head.

"All right, here's the plan. You're going to run for president. Do you hear me, Sarah, PRESIDENT!"

The voice started laughing. It laughed and laughed and laughed. It sounded like a chorus of toilets flushing and choking and overflowing until the whole world was standing ankle deep in it.

"And then you're going to marry Tom Cruise."

Sarah kept crying. The voice kept laughing.

"Ha, ha, ha, ha, ha, ha, ha, ha, ha, ha, ha, ha, ha…"

The Falcon

Carlos Deulofeu was one of the fastest players in the history of Argentine soccer. His nickname was *El Halcón*—the falcon—the fastest of all animals, almost three times faster than a cheetah. When he was in his prime, opponents claimed that all they saw was a blur when Deulofeu flew past them.

But lately Deulofeu had lost a step or two. He never had great ball skills—never needed them. And now, with his legendary speed all but gone, he was rapidly becoming just another player.

It hurt to hear the fans chant their insults.

Old age burns and stings.
El halcón now sits in his birdcage and of yesterday sings.
Halcón, halcón, they have cut off your wings.

But what troubled Deulofeu even more was the fear that the coach was going replace him. He always knew he would have to retire one day. He just wasn't ready for that day to come so soon.

"I would do anything for one more season in the sun," he said, icing down his aching knee after another bad game. "Hell, I would do anything for one more game."

"If you are serious about doing anything," Gaston, the trainer, whispered, "I know someone who might be able to help you."

"I am," Deulofeu said.

The next night the trainer took Deulofeu to meet an old man.

"You must do whatever this *brujo* says," Gaston said. "He is a witch with great powers. I have told him of your situation and he has prepared a cure."

"*Esta bien*," Deulofeu said. "I will do it."

The old man didn't look like he had any special powers. He just looked like an old man.

There was a strange smell in the dark little room.

The *brujo* signaled for Deulofeu to sit down at a small table. Then he left the room and came back with a bowl. He placed it down in front of Deulofeu.

"Eat all of this," he said. "Leave only the bones, *solo los huesos*."

Deulofeu realized that this soup had been the cause of the odd smell.

"What is this?" he asked.

"Eat," was all the old man said.

Deulofeu pulled the tender meat off the tiny bones and chewed on it, slurping up the clear broth.

"I've had worse," he said when he was finished.

"You will now be fast again. But only three times each day. *No más*," the brujo said. "This thing is most important."

"Yeah, okay," Deulofeu said. "What was that I just ate?"

"The feet of a newborn," the old man said.

"A newborn what?"

"A human child."

"You must be joking," Deulofeu said, seeing that the old man did not seem to be joking.

El Halcón spent the entire night throwing up and in the morning he didn't feel any faster.

"You'll pay for this," he said, shaking his fist at the trainer. "That *brujería* of yours was a waste of time."

"*Paciencia*," Gaston said. "Patience."

The first time it happened, Deulofeu wasn't even fully aware.

It didn't feel like he was going that fast. But he effortlessly blew by defenders a couple of times during practice. He couldn't remember the last time that had happened.

"What do you know?" he said, smiling.

He couldn't remember the last time he had done that either.

During the game Sunday, Deulofeu used his new power twice during the first half. The first time he ran too fast. He outran the ball, failing to push it hard enough out in front of him. But the second time was different.

He took the ball with him, blazing like a comet across the field. He was faster than he had ever been.

"¡Halcón! ¡Halcón!" the crowd shouted when he scored.

In the second half he repeated the move, but he was too fast for the linesman's eyes. He called him offside.

With less than a minute to go, the game was still tied 1-1.

A teammate stole the ball and passed it to Deulofeu in the dying seconds.

"¡Halcón! ¡Halcón!" the crowd cheered.

"Again!" Deulofeu called down to his legs. "Again!"

He tore through the other team's defense like it was tissue paper. There was only the goalkeeper to beat and he guessed wrong. Deulofeu's feet softly cradled the ball like a baby into the back of the empty net.

The stadium erupted in hysteria.

Goal! *¡Goooooooool!*

As the other players ran toward him to celebrate, Deulofeu felt strange. There was something wrong with his feet.

"*Mis pobres pies*," he shouted. "My poor feet!"

Deulofeu exploded past them toward the locker room. In all the cheering, they didn't hear his screams.

It wasn't until they reached the locker room that they heard him.

The screams were coming from the shower.

"*Mis pobres pies*," he yelled. "My poor feet!"

They rushed toward him, a sick burning smell hitting their nostrils when they reached the shower room.

"*Mis pobres pies*," the screams echoed. "My poor feet!"

The water was still on, but Deulofeu wasn't there.

All they found was a pile of wet ashes on the tiles near one of the drains.

The screams were still bouncing off the walls.

"*Mis pobres pies*. My poor feet!"

Carlos Deulofeu was never seen again.

Jail Break

"How long have you been here?" Edward asked.

"I can't even remember," Jerry groaned.

"Twelve years for me next April," Myron said.

"Seven here," Edward said.

"I moved in last week, but each day feels like a year," Phil said. "I don't know how you fellas do it."

"You'll get used to that," Myron said. "It helps if you have a hobby. I'm a crossword puzzle man myself."

"Don't you ever wonder about the changes?" Edward asked. "I mean flying cars, things like that."

"They're never gonna have flying cars," Myron said. "That's just sci-fi nonsense is all that is."

"Well, as of six days ago anyway, I can tell you there were no flying cars. You can rest assured of that," Phil said.

"I don't care about the new stuff. I just want some old joy," Jerry said. "Pizza. Beer. The ladies."

"They still had those six days ago, rookie?" Edward said.

"Yeah, they still had those," Phil sighed.

"That's good enough for me," Jerry said. "I say we make a break for it."

"Don't we have to wait for something to happen, like a plague or at least some weird chemicals to seep down in the soil?" Phil asked.

"Aw, that's just movie stuff," Jerry said. "I'm done waiting. Who's with me?"

"Field trip?" Myron said.

"Field trip," Jerry said.

"Field trip," they all said together.

"Okay, on three," Jerry said. "One, two, three."

They started pushing. And they started groaning. And they started huffing. And they started puffing. They pushed and groaned and huffed and puffed.

"Man, I've really let myself go," Edward said.

"My back's gonna let me hear about this in the morning," Myron said.

"Yeah, I don't know about this," Phil said.

"Eyes on the prize, gentlemen," Jerry said. "Eyes on the prize. Pace yourselves."

Several hours later, Jerry made it to the surface. He waited for his friends, looking up at the full moon.

One by one the others poked out a hand, a head, a torso, until they were all out. They sat there for a while, surrounded by the gray, stone markers and dead flowers, breathing hard.

"First thing I'm doing is going after the cheap bastard that bought me that little tombstone," Jerry said. "Okay, second thing. First thing is pizza."

"Pizza," the others repeated. "Pizza."

They got up, dusted the dirt off, and started shuffling toward town.

Old Relic Head

A small package arrived in the mailbox.

"Look," Mary said. "It's from your brother."

Jerome hadn't heard from his brother in a long time. He was an archeologist and had disappeared at a ruin somewhere in Thailand more than 10 years earlier.

"I thought he was dead," Jerome said.

"He might still be," Mary whispered. "The postmark is stamped *1998*."

The package had been mailed at the end of the last century.

Jerome drove them home and pulled the car into the garage. He sat behind the wheel, holding the package.

"I'll be right in," he said, waiting for his wife to go inside the house.

Then he slowly tore the brown paper wrapping and removed the tiny lid.

Inside was a small head chiseled out of stone. There was no letter. No note.

"Hmmm," Jerome said, turning the Ping Pong ball-sized head between his fingers.

It looked ancient, the work of a very primitive culture.

Jerome went in the house and placed the relic on a bookshelf near his desk. The days passed and he forgot about it.

But the head did not forget about Jerome. It watched him. And it waited.

And then one night it stopped waiting.

As Jerome stared up at the ceiling from the uncomfortably soft bed, the strange golden-haired woman called "Meh-ree" sleeping next to him, the words formed in his mind.

Must make sacrifice.

His tongue struggled to speak and when the words finally came out they were in a language he did not understand.

"Must… ma… make… sa-cri-fice," he whispered, the strange sounds thick in his throat. "Hu-man sa-cri-fice."

A few minutes later, Jerome made his first offering.

But that would just be the beginning.

The blood still warm in his chin and hands, Jerome looked out the living room window at all the other structures filled with people.

He smiled.

And opened the front door.

Sweatshirt

Devin had lived in the woods for the last 10 years. He would drive almost 200 miles to the nearest town once a month for supplies. That was pretty much the only time he saw other people. He liked it that way, except that sometimes it did get a little lonely.

He was never good at conversation, even when he lived in a big city. He could never think of what to say at the time. Later, when he was by himself, the ideas would come to him. But by then it was too late.

One day Devin wrote an email to a company that had sent him the wrong size sweatshirt.

A friendly response came back an hour later, apologizing and stating that the company would send him the correct size right away.

The email was signed by someone named *Lynn*.

Devin wrote back to thank her for her prompt and kind response.

His monthly trip into town was coming up in three days and he held out little hope that the sweatshirt would be at the post office that soon. Living the way he did, Devin had learned to be patient about such things. But when he went to pick up his mail, the package was waiting for him.

When he got home, Devin emailed the company to thank them again.

Lynn back wrote a few minutes later: "Our pleasure. Hope it's a good fit this time."

It was.

About a week later, Lynn wrote back to ask how the sweatshirt had worked out.

"Fine," Devin wrote. "This one's a keeper."

Over the next few months, the two wrote to each other regularly.

Their correspondence was so effortless and so natural and Devin started to like Lynn more and more. Once they sent each other photos of themselves. Devin spent a whole day taking self-portraits, trying to get it just right.

About a year after they had first started writing, Devin finally asked Lynn out on a date.

"Yes," she wrote back.

Devin drove the 1,000 miles to the big city where Lynn lived the next day. The long drive gave him plenty of time to go over and rehearse the things he would talk about. He was so excited, he barely got any sleep that night.

The next day was Sunday. They had agreed to meet for lunch and then go to the zoo.

Devin drove over to her house. When he got there he double-checked the street number and triple-checked his hair.

He walked up the walkway and rang the bell.

A sad looking woman dressed in black answered the door.

"Hello," Devin said. "Is Lynn home?"

The woman stared at Devin for a moment and started crying. Then she closed the door.

A minute later a man came out.

He told Devin that Lynn had been killed by a man she met on the internet.

"I can't believe it. There must be some mistake," Devin said. "When… when did this happen?"

The man fought back tears and said, "It was a year ago today."

Waiting for the Bus

James was alone in his hotel room.

It had been a long day. Life on the road was hard. He could barely remember what town he was in.

He stretched out on the bed and reached for the TV remote. He was pretty sure the football game was still on. But before he could switch it on, he heard a noise. It sounded like a child crying. And it sounded like it was right under the bed.

"Must be coming from downstairs," James mumbled.

But the cries got louder. Like they were coming from inside the room.

The smell of death filled the air and James suddenly felt like he wasn't alone on the bed. He rolled over and saw it. There was a baby next to him on the bed!

James stared at it in horror. What was going on here?

The baby's diaper looked like it was going to explode. "Jimmie" was written on his little shirt. There was something familiar about its face. Though James couldn't exactly place it, he felt like he had seen the baby before.

The baby kept crying.

"Can't you do something?" an old voice said from across the room. "I'm trying to sleep here."

James turned and saw that there was now an old man sitting on the chair by the window.

"What? Who are you?"

The old man got up out of the chair. He started shuffling toward the bed.

There was something familiar about him, too.

"You're in the wrong room, old man," James said, staring at his face. "Is this your grandson or something?"

"Not exactly," the old man said. "Not exactly."

"Maybe *I'm* in the wrong room," James said. "Maybe this is just a nightmar—"

Suddenly something clicked in his brain and James knew.

The pictures he had seen of himself as a baby. It was the same face. The crying baby on the bed was him. *He* was the baby.

And just as James knew that to be a fact, he was also certain about the old man. He was the old man, too. Or the old man was him. He was looking at his future and his past.

"Yeah," James said to himself. "I must be dreaming."

But when he woke up in the morning, he realized it wasn't a dream. He left his car in the parking lot—it was too small for all of them—and walked to the bus stop.

They stood there waiting. All of them. Almost 20 in all. James. The baby, Jimmie. The old man, Jim. A five-year-old James in a little plaid shirt. A middle aged James with gray hair. A high school James with terrible acne. And assorted others. There was even a fetus James from before he was born, the long umbilical cord dragging behind it on the sidewalk.

And there was a corpse James, the rotting flesh dropping from him.

They all stood there waiting for the bus.

Four-Part Disharmony

Cast of Characters

Dr. Klulaise…a psychiatrist, late forties
Mason Jahr…a mental patient, 13
Mr. Rains, Fitch, Solomon…different personalities inside Mason's mind

TIME: night

SETTING: Dr. Klulaise's office inside a mental hospital for the criminally insane.

ACT ONE (the last act)

SCENE 1 (the last scene)

(Mason Jahr enters the room and sits down on the sofa across from where Dr. Klulaise is sitting.)

DR. KLULAISE

Hello, Mason.

MASON

Hello, Doctor.

DR. KLULAISE

Mason, I'd like to begin today with what happened that day. In the park. I think you're ready.

MASON

What day is that, doctor?

DR. KLULAISE

The day you lost your temper. The day you hurt that boy. Can you tell me about it? Mason?

MR. RAINS

Mason's not here right now. I think he's playing on the swing.

DR. KLULAISE

Is that you, Mr. Rains?

MR. RAINS

Yes, it's me, Doctor K.

DR. KLULAISE

Can you tell me about that day, Mr. Rains?

MR. RAINS

You know I would if I could but I wasn't there.

DR. KLULAISE

Who was there, Mr. Rains?

MR. RAINS

Well, I would guess that Mason was there. He would almost have to be. Have you tried asking that bully?

DR. KLULAISE

I'm afraid he's lost the ability to speak.

MR. RAINS

Not much more than a vegetable, eh? Oh, dear. How unfortunate. Though from what I hear, he did have it coming to him. What about the others?

DR. KLULAISE

What do you hear, Mr. Rains? By *the others* do you mean Fitch and Solomon?

MR. RAINS

Yes, they would be the ones.

DR. KLULAISE

Can I speak to them?

MASON

I don't think this is a good idea. We're not ready yet, doctor. I'm starting to get a bad feeling about this. A real bad feeling.

DR. KLULAISE

Mason, is that you again?

FITCH

Hello, Dr. Klulaise.

DR. KLULAISE

Fitch, how have you been?

FITCH

Well, you know. Just biding my time. One of many. Take a number. Wait your turn. That sort of thing.

DR. KLULAISE

Fitch, what happened that day in the park? On the slide. With that boy.

FITCH

I'm sure I don't know what you're talking about.

DR. KLULAISE

Weren't you there?

FITCH

It was my nap time. I never miss it. It's the only time I'm really free. Away from all these others. Have you talked to Solomon about it?

DR. KLULAISE

No, but I'd like to. Is he there?

FITCH

Solomon? You about?

SOLOMON

Yes, yes. What is it?

DR. KLULAISE

It's Dr. Klulaise, Solomon. How are you?

SOLOMON

No small talk, doc. Get to the point. I'd like to the get back to my, um, inner thought.

DR. KLULAISE

Don't you mean inner *thoughts*?

SOLOMON

I only have one. You know that, doc.

DR. KLULAISE

All right. Solomon, what happened that day on the slide in the park? Why did Mason attack that other child?

SOLOMON

Well, that boy had been picking on Mason something awful. I merely suggested he give him a taste of his own medicine. I don't think he liked it. The taste of his own medicine, I mean. I suspect it tasted quite nasty. His brain juices running down his ears and nose and all.

DR. KLULAISE

Couldn't you have suggested a less violent solution?

SOLOMON

It's not in my nature. You know, like in *The Lady from Shanghai*, doc.

DR. KLULAISE

I haven't seen that one.

SOLOMON

Oh, it's a good one, doc. They don't make them like that anymore. I suppose it wasn't in Mason's nature either.

DR. KLULAISE

May I speak to Mason?

SOLOMON

Be careful what you ask for, doc. Be very careful.

MR. RAINS
(whispering)

Your timing is not the best, Doctor K. Mason's getting that look again.

DR. KLULAISE

Mr. Rains? Where did Solomon go? What look is that?

MR. RAINS

Solomon likes to come and go. You should know that by now, Doctor K. He would say it's in his nature.

(Dr. Klulaise writes something down in his journal. When he looks up, Mason is standing a few feet away.)

DR. KLULAISE

Please sit down, Mr. Rains.

MASON

Mr. Rains had to go. He was never here actually. Neither was Fitch. Neither was Solomon. There are no others, doctor. There's only me. There was always only me. See what I mean?

(Mason moves closer toward Dr. Klulaise with a terrible expression on his face.)

DR. KLULAISE

Please sit down, Mason.

MASON

I don't think so, doctor. I suppose if you want to treat yourself to one last consolation you can tell yourself that you cured me. Now it's your turn. Time for *your* medicine, doctor.

SOLOMON

Yes, time for your medicine, doc. Open wide and say, "Aaah!"

DR. KLULAISE
(screaming)

No! No! Noooo!

(Mason pounds Dr. Klulaise's head into the tile floor until he stops screaming. He then kneels over the dead body and smiles. They all smile.)

Patience

Every night at midnight the head comes down the chimney. It rolls toward the front door and waits.
It waits and waits and waits.
And waits some more.
It waits for you.
Bwahahahahahahahaa…
AAAH!

Waning Carter

The waning crescent moon weakly lit the bedroom as Carter snored loudly under the covers.

A cold breeze blew in through an open window. And then a shadow passed over Carter's head.

"Hello, Carter," a voice whispered.

Carter sat up in bed and looked around. There was nothing there.

He turned on the light.

"I was hoping you'd do that," the voice said. "The darkness kills me. It's light that keeps me alive."

Carter saw an outline, inky and large, coming toward him.

"Who are you?" he said.

"I am your shadow."

Carter began to tremble and grow pale.

"Easy there, Carter. I don't mean you any harm. After all, without you I'm nothing."

The shadow left the room. Carter heard some noises in the kitchen. A minute later it was back.

"I brought you some cookies and warm milk to help you get back to sleep."

Carter felt better. Much better. He smiled.

The shadow smiled, too. Carter was stupid enough to believe anything. This was going to be easy. Easy as taking candy from a baby. (What's a baby doing with candy anyway?) Easy as pie. (The eating, not the baking.) Easy as holding a pillow. (Over someone's head while they sleep.)

Carter stretched and yawned.

"Goodnight, room. Goodnight, moon. Goodnight, shadow."

"Goodnight, Carter. Goodnight. *And good-bye*."

"Mmmmm…"

Bear and Grin It

A deep line formed between Emily's eyes as she squinted down at a pile of bear scat while her dad explained how a lot could be learned by studying an animal's fecal matter.

"Look there," he poked and pointed with a branch. "You see what's left of those pine nuts?"

Suddenly Emily heard a terrible growl. She spun around and saw a huge brown bear running down the trail toward her. Her dad had disappeared and the forest was purple, cold, and dark. Somehow, though, she could see the bear perfectly. Its glowing, crazed eyes closed in, no more than 20 feet away now.

A split second later, as the grizzly towered over her, Emily raised her arms over her head. The bear let fly a deafening roar. It was so close she could smell its awful, rotting fish breath as it swung its head from side to side, drool dangling from its mouth.

The claws came toward her like lightning. She felt them rip into the side of her face as she flew through the air from the force of the blow. Everything turned warm and red. The bear closed in again. Coming closer. Closer…

And then in the final moments of her short life, Emily realized that it wasn't a bear after all. It was something worse. Something so much wor—

"Aaah!"

She woke with a scream, sweat on her upper lip.

"Oh, man."

It seemed so real, she thought, trying to catch her breath. The bear at first, and then that other horrible thing. She raised her head off the damp, lumpy pillow and saw a dark shape next to her on the bed. It was the book she had been reading when she fell asleep: *Dead and Bear-ied*, a gruesomely-detailed collection about people who had been killed by bears.

"Genius move," Emily sighed, pushing the book away. "Get back to sleep now."

After replaying the dream over and over and over again, her mind finally let it go. She awoke in the morning to the smell of coffee and bacon, the sun coming in low through a crack in the curtain.

After breakfast they were back exploring the national park. Her dad and younger sister, Danielle, led the way while Emily—still feeling more zombie than human—brought up the rear. The short trail hugged the rim hundreds of feet above the Yellowstone River.

"Wow," their dad said slowly, scanning the horizon. "Those bad boys look like they mean business."

Although it was still mostly blue overhead, dark clouds had gathered in the distance. A few minutes later they reached the turnaround point. A marmot poked its nose out of a nearby hole. It stood on a rock and studied them. A cold breeze blew from the north. It was time to head back.

The sky had quickly turned the color of wet concrete.

They were less than two miles from the car when the storm hit. First wind and then rain. Emily had to hold on to her hat to keep it from being blown off her head. The big drops struck them from the side. In less than a minute, half of Emily's body was completely soaked while the other half, the side facing away from the canyon, was bone dry. Goose bumps engulfed her bare arms.

"April showers bring May flowers," Danielle whined. "Over someone's *grave*."

"Too bad it's June," Emily shouted, trying to smile. "You little goon."

But she knew how her sister felt. The suddenness and strength of the storm was scary. Their car suddenly felt very far away.

Since the morning began clear and this was such a short hike, their dad had left his daypack behind, bringing only a water bottle. Their ponchos sat nice and dry and useless in the trunk of the car.

The wind and the rain continued and were soon joined by thunder. At first the flashes of lightning and cracks of thunder were separated by several seconds. But the electrical part of the storm was coming their way.

"Come on!" their dad shouted as he stepped off the trail.

It was dark under the trees, very dark. But at least it gave them some shelter and a chance to regroup. Thunder exploded overhead as they huddled together.

"They're going t-t-t-to find our bones here," Danielle cried, her lips beginning to turn a little blue.

Emily suddenly found herself staring down at a pile of bear scat. There were pine nuts in it. And it was steaming. She began shaking.

Stories from the bear attack book ripped through her mind. The woman who had been running on a trail with two friends before a bear tore into her. The boy pulled out of a tent and dragged off to his death, his screams echoing in the night. Another woman going on the roof of her cabin to escape a bear. The bear following her. Three teenage boys stalked and killed by a bear while fishing. Their bodies found together under a pile of leaves, the bear hovering over them, protecting its kill.

"Daaad," Emily called, the nightmare back and as fresh as the feces at her feet.

Just then a bright flash filled the forest followed almost immediately by another deafening roar overhead. With her ears ringing, her eyes desperately tried to adjust to the dark again.

Suddenly, Emily made out a large shape lumbering toward them from the far end of the grove. She couldn't be sure what she really saw, if anything, but at that moment she felt a terror no horror movie could match. She clenched her teeth to hold back the scream that had swallowed her mind.

"We've got to get moving," their dad shouted. "This is no good."

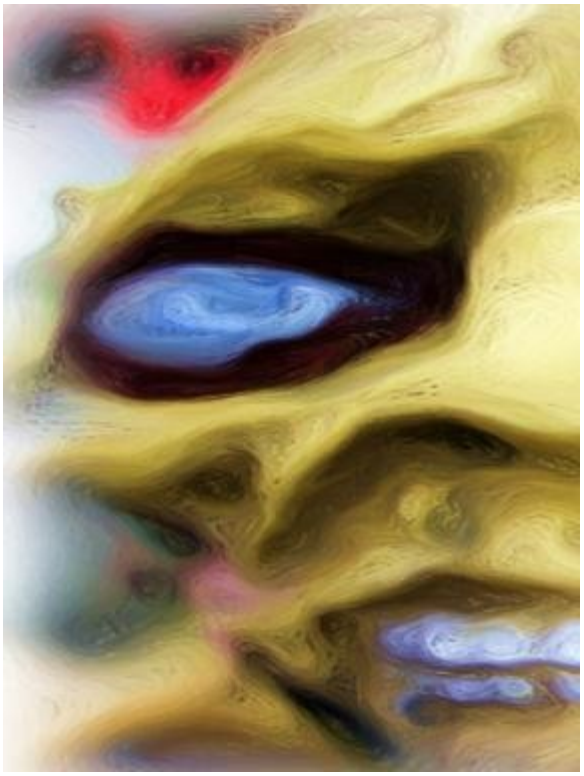
He grabbed Danielle by the hand and began running downhill. Emily didn't hesitate. She was too scared to look back. The storm was still raging, the thunder and lightning continuing their assault. But in a few minutes, with the blood pumping hard through her body, Danielle had stopped shivering and her lips were no longer blue. Emily felt better, too. She hoped the bear, whether flesh and blood or a phantom of her imagination, was somewhere far behind them.

Like the rain, they kept dropping down and eventually reached a road. They started walking in the direction of the parking lot.

"We're gonna make it," their dad said as the storm began to subside. "Look, I think I see the car."

***

Good, they're getting closer, the thing hiding in the trunk thought, thick saliva filling its mouth and dribbling down onto the ponchos. *So close now. I must remember to leave something for the bears. After all, they help get the juices flowing, making the meat all the more amazing. And they get the blame. While I, oh, I get the morsels. And what sweet morsels these three will be. Mmmm, the smells are all around me. They're just a few feet away now. That's right. It's warm and cozy in here. Hurry inside. That's right. Mmmm. That's so right.*



Love Mix

Allison was determined to declutter her home.

She had made it her number one New Year's resolution.

And she knew exactly where to begin. That drawer in the kitchen. *The* drawer.

The one she used for everything from tools to spare change to dead batteries to old telephone bills to inkless pens to shriveled up crepe party ribbons.

The drawer perfectly captured her "organizational skills." She had none. But that was about to change.

"You're going down, mister," she said and pulled the drawer out and placed it on the table.

She started sorting through the contents, not hesitating to throw out anything that didn't immediately strike her as useful.

"I feel better already," Allison said, smiling.

Then she found an old CD.

Love Mix was written on it with a red permanent marker. There was a little heart with an arrow going through it.

"Oh, yeah," she whispered. "Walter gave me this last Valentine's Day."

She stared off for a moment, remembering her old boyfriend. She shook her head.

"You sure know how to pick 'em, Allison. Well, at least he had good taste in music."

She got up, walked over to the stereo, and put in the CD.

A song came on called *Love Hurts*.

"That's weird," Allison said. "I know this wasn't on there before."

Allison remembered liking the mix. She had listened to it often back when Walter had first given it to her. Back when she still liked him.

The next song was the same song performed by a different artist. Allison hit the forward button.

Roy Orbison sang *Love Hurts*. She pushed forward again. Joan Jett sang *Love Hurts*. She advanced the playlist to the next track. Nazareth sang *Love Hurts*.

The entire CD was made up of different versions of the same song. Gram Parsons with Emmylou Harris, Emmylou Harris alone, the Everly Brothers, the sisters from Heart, Rod Stewart, Cher, The Who, and Pat Boone. Pat Boone!

They were all on there.

Allison forgot about the drawer.

She found herself picking up the phone and dialing Walter's number, not really knowing why.

"Hello."

"Hello, uh, is Walter there?"

"I'm sorry," the voice on the other end of the line said. "Walter died last week. Who is this?"

Allison hung up. Just then there was a loud knock at the door.

She looked out through the peephole. There was no one there.

She opened the door anyway. An icy breeze blew into Allison's face, forcing her to squint.

When she opened her eyes again, she saw that there was someone standing there after all.

It was Walter. Or what was left of him.

His skin was livid and gray. There was a large hole in his chest. He was holding something out in his lifeless hands.

"You broke my heart, Allison," he said. "See?"

In his hands was his broken heart. It was crying tears of blood, dripping down onto the floor.

"You were always a pig, Walter," Allison said before slamming the door. "You know how hard it is to get out blood stains?"

Under

There's something wrong with the way the word *under* looks.
There's something wrong with the way the word *under* looks when you're under the knife.
There's something wrong with the way the word *under* looks when you've come to the end of your life.
There's something wrong with the way your leg looks, all green and leaking pus.
There's something wrong with the way the word *under* looks when they throw you under the bus.
There's something wrong with the way the word *under* looks.
It's not my fave.
There's something wrong with the way the word *under* cooks when your brain's in the microwave.
AAAH!

Hissy Fit

Will was hiking in Zion National Park on a sunny afternoon in late October. He was on a narrow path carved into a canyon wall hundreds of feet above the valley floor. The views were awesome, but more than a little scary.

When Will turned a corner, he found a large rattlesnake curled up in the middle of the trail.

Will stopped dead in his tracks as a cold chill blew up and down his spine.

"Whoa," he said, holding his hand out. "Whoa."

The snake lifted its head and shook its rattle.

The path here was no more than six feet wide and there was no way around the snake.

Will decided to wait it out. *It will probably move in a few minutes*, he told himself.

He walked back down the trail and found a large stone to sit on. He passed the time looking at photos he had taken earlier on his digital camera.

After a while he got back on the trail. When he turned the corner, the snake was still there. It hadn't moved.

"All right," Will sighed. "Enough is enough. You're gonna have to let me pass."

He found a few small rocks and started throwing them at the snake, taking care not to hit it.

The rattler hissed, licking the air with its tongue, but stood its ground.

"C'mon now," Will said, beginning to lose his patience.

He found some larger rocks to throw, but the snake still refused to move.

"Quit it," Will shouted. "Just quit it."

He started looking for a branch. It took him a few minutes but he found a long stick that would do the trick. It even had a *Y* shape at one end.

He carefully approached the snake and held out the stick with a shaky hand. The snake rattled loudly.

Then Will began to lift the snake off the ground. His plan was to swing it back onto the trail behind him, but the snake was too heavy. As he held it out over the precipice, Will lost his grip on the stick and the snake fell.

It dropped down, getting smaller and smaller until it finally disappeared from view.

"That wasn't my intention," Will said, looking down. "I didn't mean you no harm. I hope you understand."

A few hours later Will was down on the valley floor and less than a mile from his car. It was getting dark and cold.

He stepped through a narrow section where two rock walls came together and then started crossing a long wooden bridge. He stopped half way and looked down at the water. There was something down there. It took a few seconds for his eyes to adjust and his brain to wrap itself around the scene.

Snakes.

There were dozens and dozens of snakes down in the water. And they all seemed to be looking up at the bridge, looking up at Will.

Will backed away in horror and that's when he heard the rattling. It was coming from the far end of the bridge. He took a few steps toward the hellish sound and saw a large pile of writhing snakes in the middle of the bridge. And then all at once the snakes went silent and looked in his direction.

Will turned around and started running. He had almost reached the other end of the bridge when he heard more rattling coming from directly in front of him. There an even larger mound of snakes blocking his escape.

Again, the snakes stopped rattling and looked directly at him. Then they started to slither in his direction. Will screamed and began backing up slowly, then running back toward the center of the bridge. The other group of snakes was still there, closing in. He thought about jumping into the river for a moment and then remembered what he had seen down there in the water.

He was trapped, completely trapped.

Will's lungs tried to suck in all the world's oxygen in one uneven breath and his brain told him that this was impossible. But his ears and eyes said something else.

The snakes moved closer and closer, their eyes glowing with red hatred, and Will screamed again.

"Please!" he shouted. "I didn't mean it. I didn't mean it!"

The snakes slithered and hissed and rattled and rattled and hissed and slithered. Closer and closer they came, until Will was surrounded by hundreds and hundreds of glowing, red eyes in the night.

Will screamed and screamed and screamed.

And then he was quiet.

All was quiet.

Except for the sound of snakes slithering ever so silently.

All was quiet.

All was quiet.

[Pause and scream...]

AAAH!

The Strand

Lori liked the library. It was a good place to study, quiet and always open late.

Tonight it was completely empty. From where she sat, Lori couldn't see another human being. It was just her and all those books. Lori wondered if the old librarian had closed up for the night and forgotten to tell her.

She shook the thought out of her head and opened the heavy chemistry book in front of her.

She noticed a strange strand of black hair next to her hand.

"Creepy," she whispered, grabbing it between her fingers.

It felt thick and coarse and prickly to the touch.

Lori began pulling at it and saw that the other end trailed off the edge of the desk. She pulled some more. The hair lifted off the surface of the desk now and Lori followed it with her eyes through the air, up, way up, until it disappeared between two ceiling tiles.

Lori kept pulling. She pulled and pulled. At some point she began wrapping the hair around her wrist like she was reeling in a kite.

"This is freakish," she said out loud.

Suddenly a loud crash came from the roof and shook the entire building. The lights flickered.

"What was that?" Lori shouted.

Then she felt something wet on her hand. When she looked down she saw that she was bleeding. Blood ran down her hand, down her fingers, down from under the wrapped strand of hair.

Lori began trying to pull it off, but it just wound itself tighter and tighter around her wrist.

"That hurts," she cried. "Get off me."

She began pulling at it again. It was taut now, running from her bloody hand to the ceiling in a straight line. Lori tugged at it sharply, thinking it might snap off. Instead the tiles began to tremble.

A moment later they gave way and something heavy crashed to the ground just beyond the desk.

Lori stood up. And saw it.

It was a head with a horrible pale face, covered with long, black hair.

It turned to face Lori and opened its mouth.

"Get your own hair," it said. "This one's mine."

Suddenly Lori felt the hair on her own head standing, stretching, pulling… pulling itself out. All at once. The tears exploded from her eyes.

She screamed.

A moment later the head was gone. And so was *all of Lori's hair*.

Papier-Mâché Man

Waldo made a life-sized papier-mâché man for Halloween. It took him more than a week to complete the project.

When it was finished, it didn't look right. It was the face. Its features were off. The eyes were glazed over, the dull paint doing nothing to bring them to life. The smile was just a black circle.

"I'll put some clothes on it," Waldo said. "That will help make it look more real."

At some point Waldo decided to dress him as a scarecrow.

On Halloween night he placed his creation on a hay bale on the front porch and lit it with some strobe lights.

Not bad, Waldo thought. *Dude ended up looking pretty good.*

A storm cut down on the number of trick-or-treaters. Waldo sat on his sofa in front of the fireplace and ate their candy. He started getting sleepy and then drifted off.

A loud knock woke him. He looked at his watch and shook his head.

"Kinda late to be out here," Waldo said, noticing that it was almost 11 o'clock.

"My thoughts exactly," the dark figure said.

"Let me see if I have some more candy here," Waldo said.

"Oh, I'm not here for candy," the man said.

"What? What do you mean?" Waldo said, rubbing his face. "What are you here for then?"

"I'm here for your soul," the man said.

Waldo realized at that moment that his visitor was dressed just like the papier-mâché scarecrow. And then as he switched on the lights, he saw that he had the same exact face, right down to the dull eyes and round mouth. It *was* the papier-mâché man. Somehow, it had come to life.

"Bu-bu-bu-but the Scarecrow was supposed to be missing a brain."

"All right," the man said. "I'll take that, too."

Waldo tried to close the door but the man stuck his boot out and pushed his way inside the house. Waldo ran off toward the bedrooms. The papier-mâché man walked after him. There was no hurry.

"I'm here for your soul, Waldo. *And your brain*," it said, chuckling. "And there's nothing you can do about it."

In the morning the papier-mâché man sat drinking espresso at the breakfast bar. Then he took a bite from his chocolate croissant and smiled a real smile.

Waldo sat out on the porch. His eyes glazed over, his smile a black circle, the inside of his head empty.

Gone to the Dogs

One day zombies began eating dog brains.

It was bound to have side effects.

They soon lost their ability to say “brains” and began barking and howling. They spent their days scratching and licking themselves and sniffing other zombies’ butts.

Some humans began putting collars on this new breed of undead and walking them. They weren’t very good at fetching or hunting, but people grew attached to them just the same.

Surprisingly, dogs weren’t missed all that much.

The transformation was complete when zombie parks started springing up.

The Dead Boy

"*You're almost home*," the voice said. "*Hooooooooome*."

At least it sounded like it could have been a voice. And if indeed it was a voice, those could have been the words it was saying. Or it could just have been like one of those EVPs they play on ghost investigation shows where whatever was recorded doesn't sound anything remotely like the subtitle at the bottom of the screen.

Either way, right now Malcolm had bigger problems.

The wind was really blowing. Whitecaps covered the water. Malcolm was glad he was close to shore. He wouldn't want to be out in the middle of the lake with this thing blowing.

He paddled over to the shore, jumped out, and dragged the kayak over the smooth rock shelf. He dug into his daypack and ripped out the map. Nothing on it matched up to real life. He had to be lost. This giant lake didn't seem to be near where he should be or thought he should be. Nowhere near. The map made no sense to him as it danced in the wind. He took out his compass and lined up north with north on the map. It still didn't add up. He had no idea where he was.

No freakin' idea.

At least the wind was good for something, Malcolm thought as he turned back toward the water. It kept away those horrible black flies and man-eating mosquitoes that had tortured him a few hours earlier.

But returning to shore, Malcolm saw that the wind was good for another thing too. The kayak wasn't where he had left it. He looked both ways like a pedestrian at a crosswalk. No kayak. Then he glanced out on the whipped-up lake and saw it, about 100 feet out and getting farther away by the second. The wind must have blown it into the water.

Trying to swim after it seemed crazy. He would not catch up to it, just be lured out into the huge lake. And even if he somehow managed to reach it, how was he going to drag it back to shore in the face of such a monstrous wind?

"Now what?" Malcolm's brain screamed as the little boat got smaller and smaller. "Now what!"

He almost thought he heard that voice again, answering him somewhere beyond the wind.

"*You're almost home*," it repeated. "*Hooooooooome*."

The gathering clouds were getting darker by the second. Thunder was already rumbling in the distance. The sky was going to open up any moment now. Malcolm put on the cheap, paper-thin emergency poncho.

"I'm so stupid," he said, fighting back tears. "Stupid, stupid, *stuuuupid*."

The wind grew even stronger as the first rain drops fell. They were big and fat and came at him at an angle. Malcolm backed away from the shore and took shelter under a pine tree. The water hit the lake in sheets. He couldn't see the kayak anymore. He hunkered down and wondered if he would have to spend the night out here.

Eventually the storm began to die down. The wind turned into a light breeze and the rain became a mist. A rainbow touched down on the far end of the lake.

The yellow kayak was nowhere in sight, but the growing blue patches in the sky made Malcolm feel better.

"It's gonna be all right," he said out loud.

But first he had to go to the bathroom. He would have to use leaves since he didn't have any toilet paper. He walked deeper into the wet woods and found a sharp rock to dig a hole. A couple of minutes later, Malcolm crouched down and left his deposit.

Just then a bright flash lit up the forest. It was followed by a thunderclap that sounded like eight pianos falling off a tall building.

Malcolm started running back toward the lake, but tripped on a tree stump. He fell face first into the mud.

"Get a grip, fool," he said, getting up.

It was then that he saw it. At first it seemed like a large animal carcass. But as he looked closer, Malcolm saw the clothes. It was a boy. A boy about his age.

Malcolm remembered hearing about some kid who had gone snowshoeing last winter and gotten lost. He had never been found.

"This must be him," Malcolm said, feeling more sad than scared.

The head faced out from down in its lap. In places grayish-white bone stuck out through the rotted flesh. A small, black snake slithered out from the dark neck stump.

"The cold must have done that," Malcolm mumbled, not quite ready to believe low temperatures resulted in decapitation. "Yeah, he must have frozen to death."

"*Would have*," a gruesomely familiar voice suddenly whispered in Malcolm's ear. "*But I got to him first*."

Malcolm turned around slowly and saw it, hovering there less than a foot away from his face.

Something not human. Nowhere near human.

"*He didn't know it at the time, but he was looking for his home, too*," the thing said, slurping at the air. "*Now you're both home*."

Malcolm tried to run. But one, two, three steps down the trail something wet and slimy and sharp wrapped around his neck and pulled him back *home*.

Malcolm didn't even have time to—

AAAH!

The Way You Walk is Thorny

Dano is the best thing on *Five-O*.
He swings his little arms to and fro.
He's the son of Sonny.
But I ain't no dummy.
His hair could rip the head off a bunny.
Can't pull the wool over these eyes, dope.
He's part lycanthrope.

Dead Woman's House

A large moving van pulled up in front of the house down the street.

"Look," Dewey said to his younger brother as he looked out the window. "That makes three. Three families have moved out of there in under a year. All since that old woman died. I tell you it's haunted."

"Oooh," Louie said. "I don't know."

"We should go check it out," Dewey said, ignoring his brother's hesitation.

Two nights later the two boys snuck around the back of the empty house.

"Yeah," Dewey whispered as he turned the doorknob. "They forgot to lock it."

They walked in through the side door into the dark garage.

"Oooh," Louie said. "I don't know."

Dewey switched on his flashlight.

"Let's hope the door leading into the house is unlocked, too," he said, walking up the stairs.

He turned the knob and pushed against the cold door. It opened.

"Let's go, man," Dewey said to Louie, who was lagging behind. "It's like it's meant to be."

Except for a box of cleaning supplies and a thick yellow phone book in a corner of the kitchen, the house was completely empty. It smelled clean and alone, like no one lived in it anymore. The brothers shuffled slowly from room to room, but didn't find anything.

"Okay," Louie said. "Can we go now?"

"I guess," Dewey said, releasing a long, sad sigh. "Guess there's nothing here."

"I wouldn't say that," an old voice suddenly said.

Dewey stopped in his tracks.

"That's not funny," Louie said.

"Hey, that wasn't me," Dewey said.

"He's right," the voice said. "It was *me*."

Suddenly the room was filled with a horrible old woman smell. And then the flashlight went out.

Louie began to cry in the dark.

"Don't cry," the voice whispered in his ear. "I'm right here. I'm right here."

Dewey felt icy cold bony fingers wrap around his wrist. He let out a soft whimper before fainting. Louie stopped crying and started drooling. It puddled on the floor down by his feet, joining together with other fluids.

Everything had gone all phooey.

Dewey and Louie were never seen again.

Landfill Horror

Something vile crawled out of the trash dump. It stood without legs. It started walking, then running toward town.

Your town.

AAAH!

Scooped

The police officer parked behind the broken-down car. In his headlights he saw the silhouette of a young woman standing beside it. He wondered how long she had been out here in the dark on this lonely desert road, waiting for help.

"I stopped to look at the sunset and then I couldn't get it to start," she said. "I just filled it up, so I know I'm not out of gas."

"Let me give it a shot," he said, getting behind the wheel.

Nothing happened.

"Sounds like it could be the fuel pump," he said. "Take over here and I'll tell you when to start it."

He looked under the hood for a while and made a few adjustments.

"All right," he said. "Try it now."

"Now?" the woman said in the dark, suddenly standing next to him.

"Hey, you're supposed to be in the car," he said.

"I know," she said. "But I got hungry."

He couldn't see her face but her eyes seemed to be glowing.

The next morning they found the police officer sitting in his car, staring down the road.

The top of his head was gone.

And his brain was missing.

The Stare

Paul was going pretty fast. The old woman didn't seem to see him. She just stepped out into the street. Paul squeezed hard on his brakes and came to a skidding stop. He looked over at the woman. She looked back but didn't move. Paul waited and then waved, signaling her to cross.

The old woman didn't react and didn't move. She just stood there staring at Paul. It was an odd, blank stare. Paul couldn't read it. He couldn't figure out if she was sorry, angry, or something else. Paul stared back, starting to get irritated.

"C'mon, hag," he said under his breath. "I don't have all day."

The standoff ended with Paul giving her a "the hell with it then" wave.

He could feel her empty stare burning into the side of his face as he pedaled past her.

Old fool, Paul thought. *One minute she's all about crossing and then she freezes up and acts like a mindless mule.*

As the miles rolled by, Paul eventually forgot about the old woman. But the old woman didn't forget about Paul.

She went home and cast a spell.

A minute later Paul found himself flying through the air. His bike had left the mountain road and was falling somewhere below him. Right before he smashed into the ground and his body into a million pieces, he saw the old woman's face again. She was still staring.

It was the last thing he saw.

The Long Recline

As he drove through the beach town, the young man realized he was tired. Dead tired.

He could barely keep his eyes open. He still had more than 200 miles to go before he reached his home, so he decided to stop for the night at the next motel he saw.

A few minutes later he walked into an old room.

Dust flew up in the air as the young man plopped down into an ancient recliner by the window. He coughed and looked out at the dark ocean and the stars above the water.

"Nice view," he mumbled.

After a few minutes, he tried to get up and head toward the bed, but the chair didn't seem to want to let him go. Nothing happened when he pushed down on the leg rest. The side lever was useless as well.

The recliner was stuck.

"Can't say it's not comfortable," the young man said, yawning.

He soon fell asleep to the sound of the waves pounding on the shore.

It was early dawn when the young man woke up. He was sore. More sore than he could ever remember being. It was as if his muscles had been swept out to sea. His bones felt like jellyfish. He tried to get up, but the recliner was too strong.

The young man looked around, confused.

A thick layer of dust covered his legs and torso. There was a glass of water on the little table next to him. He picked it up. There was something in the glass, but it was hard to see. Everything was blurry. It looked like teeth, dentures maybe.

He put the glass down with a shaky hand, the water spilling.

With a feeling of horror, the young man ran his tongue over his gums.

He reached up and put his wrinkled fingers in his mouth.

He realized the teeth in the glass belonged to him. *The teeth belonged to him.*

He sat in the chair all day long. Just sat there. Every once in a while, he tried to get up. But it was no use. The recliner was too strong.

He never got up again.

The Ghoul

Albert dumped the last shovelful of dirt onto the grave.

"There," he said. "Another one bites the dust."

It had been a bad week for the living. And a good one for the town's lone cemetery. Two fresh graves today. Three yesterday. If things kept up like this, he would need to buy a bulldozer or something. His old back and rusty shovel wouldn't be able to keep up.

The sun had just gone down. Albert leaned on the shovel, breathing hard.

Looking off in the distance, he suddenly saw something scurry out of the woods and behind one of the tombstones. Then dirt began flying up in the air.

"What in—" Albert said, walking toward the grave.

As he reached the marker belonging to old Mrs. Crenshaw, Albert saw the thing crawl back out of the ground. Whatever it was wasn't human. Not anymore anyway. The flesh was rotting and falling off its face. Pieces of brain were showing through in spots, the hair and skull no longer there. The creature gave off a foul, inhuman stench. It stopped for a moment and stared at Albert with dark red eyes as it chewed on something.

The zombie, or whatever it was, then made a sound somewhere between a wheeze and a laugh and walked back toward the woods.

Albert looked down at the grave and saw that the corpse—which he had just buried the day before—was missing huge sections. The entire torso was gone, as well as big chucks of the thighs and upper arms. The part that Albert found most disturbing, though, was that Mrs. Crenshaw's was missing her face.

"Hey," he called out. "You can't go around eating dead bodies!"

The thing disappeared into the trees and Albert gave chase.

It was dark in the woods but he was able to just make out the shape as it moved slowly and deeper into the forest. After a few minutes Albert caught up to it.

"Hey!" he said, reaching up and putting his hand on the thing's shoulder. "I won't have any of your zombie business. You can't go around eating dead bodies out of my graveyard."

The thing turned around.

"First, I'm not a zombie," it whispered in an old, weathered voice. "Although I suppose I understand why you'd be confused. And what would you suggest? That I start eating the living?"

Albert saw the thing's face in the dying light. The eyes were the same, but the rest of the features didn't belong to the creature he had just seen a few moments before. Its face had been replaced by one he knew…

Mrs. Crenshaw.

She studied Albert with her dark red eyes and nodded slowly. Then she smiled.

"Oh, why not?" she said and laughed.

Albert screamed and dropped his shovel. The screaming got louder and more desperate and then finally died off. There was a tearing sound followed by loud chomping and slurping. And then it was quiet.

Albert walked back to the graveyard. The moon was out. Still hungry, he started digging in the dirt again. With his hands.

The Rathmore Academy

The Rathmore Academy was going through some tough times. Fewer students were applying, the cream of the crop had started going elsewhere, and money was getting tight.

The board of directors at the prestigious prep school was desperate.

"Grades are down," Dr. Clausen said. "The future looks rather bleak."

"It's a vicious circle," Dean Smythe said. "More knuckleheads mean our ranking will continue to drop. Lower enrollment means fewer tuition dollars coming in. And fewer dollars… well, I think you all know what fewer dollars mean."

The people sitting around the large polished table looked like they were attending a funeral.

"I think I may have an idea," the cafeteria manager said with a gleam in his eye. "But I warn you, it's a little outside the box."

Ralph thought it was pretty cool that he had been chosen. He was a fairly average student and had never won anything.

"We're starting something new this month," the school director had said. "Rathmore Academy is recognizing some of its outstanding students with monthly awards."

But as he looked around at his fellow winners Ralph had to admit that none of them stood out—except for their poor behavior or serious learning disabilities or both. He was pretty sure he didn't fit into either group.

In honor of their achievements, the students were treated to a special luncheon.

"I hope you enjoyed your last meal," the director said afterwards. "You've been selected to make the ultimate sacrifice for your school. We will tell your parents that you have been transferred to our campus in Switzerland. Just imagine their pride. *You* will write to them regularly. Several months or perhaps even a year from now they will be informed that you met your end in a most unfortunate accident. By then, Rathmore—having been rid of you and others like you—will be well on its way to a renaissance. You will all be remembered as heroes."

"You should not look at this as the end," the cafeteria manager said. "You will live on in our hearts. And in our stomachs. We will use your remains to feed your fellow students for the next few weeks."

At first Ralph thought it had to be some sort of sick joke. But then he saw the men dressed in white enter through a side door. A moment later they each grabbed a student and pulled out a syringe containing an antifreeze-looking green fluid.

Ralph didn't think it would work, but he had nothing to lose.

"Wait," he said to the man holding him. "I have something in my eye."

The man paused for a moment, perhaps surprised that anyone would want to rub their eye when they were staring death in the face.

Ralph kneed him in the crotch and ran for the door.

It was unlocked.

"After him!" the director shouted behind him. "Don't let him get away."

Ralph ran down the hall and out the front door. Then he ran down the sidewalk and cut through the park.

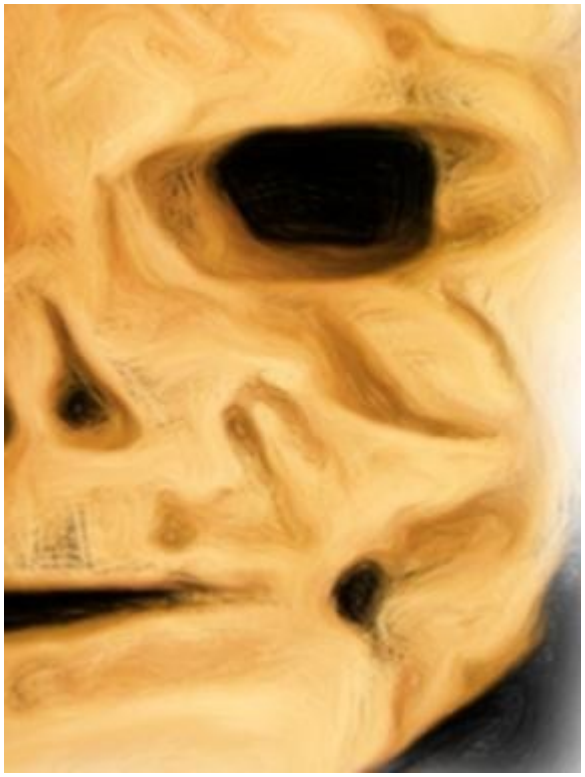
He needed to get far away and get help.

But who would believe him? The whole thing seemed so insane that he could hardly believe it himself.

He wasn't going to think about that now. And he wasn't going to think about the fact that these people would not rest until he had been silenced *forever*. He knew too much.

All he could think about right now was that his lungs were burning and that his legs were turning to cottage cheese and that the sound of the men's boots was getting closer and louder with each step.

Ralph kept running.



Fear

Lately John had begun experiencing a new emotion. Fear.

He had never been afraid in his life. It wasn't that he was brave or stupid. He just didn't feel fear. It was the same way some people are not ticklish or can't blink their left eye or like anchovies. He didn't think about it.

But one morning that all changed.

It started with a cup of coffee. He spilled some on his leg and it burned something awful. After that John stopped drinking coffee. He stopped using hot water in any form. Not even to take a shower.

Then he stopped taking showers altogether, afraid that the cold water would give him a cold that would lead to pneumonia. He started to smell bad and would have been fired from his job except that he stopped going. He was afraid of driving and stopped leaving the house. He grew afraid that the ceiling would fall on him, so he pitched a tent in the backyard.

He became afraid of the dark and went back inside and lived in fear. He stopped eating, afraid that the food was poisoned and would make him fat. He stopped drinking water, because it was too hot or too cold and reminded him of coffee or pneumonia. He stopped breathing because the air was polluted.

In the end, there was nothing left of him. Only fear.

Necromancy Gone Wild

Madison's dog died. He was old and sick and she knew it was for the best. But she still wasn't ready to let him go.

Three days after she buried the little white poodle in the backyard, Madison went down to the voodoo candle store and bought one she thought would help get the job done.

She rushed home, went up to her room, and locked the door. She placed the candle in the middle of the floor, surrounded by Scotty's collar, tennis ball, and favorite chew toy. She lit it and turned off the light.

The flame flickered and danced and threw shadows on the walls.

"Come back to me, Scotty," she whispered. "Scotty, come back."

She repeated the words several times but nothing happened.

"I should probably look from some necromancy spells online," Madison said. "I'm sure there's plenty of stuff on how to bring a dog back to li—"

Suddenly the room began to spin. Madison felt dizzy and sick. Then the candle blew out.

Madison slowly realized she wasn't in her room anymore. She stumbled around in the dark and heard whining in the distance. She walked toward the sound.

"Scotty?" she said.

It was louder now. More and more the crying reminded her of her dog.

It was soon joined by other dogs, all yipping or barking or howling.

Madison still couldn't see anything. Then she bumped into something solid, a wall or a door. She felt around for a doorknob. There was nothing there.

She could hear Scotty right on the other side.

"Hold on, boy," she said.

She started pushing against the wall.

At first nothing happened. And then it disappeared. One second the wall was there and the next it was gone.

Suddenly Madison could see again. The dogs were louder than ever, but as she squinted in the bright light she couldn't see any of them. Instead, she found herself surrounded by snakes. Thousands and thousands of snakes of all shapes and sizes and species. She was knee-deep in them. And then she realized that the snakes were the ones barking. Madison tried to remember the rhyme about red on black and red to yellow but couldn't.

What does it matter? her brain screamed. *Run. Run!*

But her legs had stopped working. She was about to scream when the largest snake slithered up above the others and raised itself high in the air, staring deeply into her eyes.

"Don't play with things you don't understand," it growled. "Death is not a game."

Then, as Madison watched helplessly, it sunk its fangs deep into the back of her hand.

She screamed in pain and lost consciousness.

When she came to, she was back in her room, sitting on the floor, the candle flickering in front of her.

Wobbly kneed, she stood up and turned on the lights.

"What a terrible nightmare," she sighed, reaching up to wipe the tears from her eyes.

That's when she felt the pain. She looked down and stared at her hand. It was bruised and puffed up freakishly large. And then she saw them. There, between her thumb and index finger… *two large red puncture wounds*.

AAAH!

Old Stone Bathroom

It was late in the day. Jim was almost back at the parking lot after a long hike. Through the wet trees he saw the bright yellow paint of his car.

"Yes," he whispered.

There weren't any other cars, which didn't surprise Jim since he hadn't seen any other people all day. The Oregon rainy season had started.

He had a long drive home and decided to start the trip on an empty bladder. He dropped off his day pack at the car and headed for the old stone bathroom he had seen by the trailhead.

After he finished, Jim turned the lock and pulled on the handle. Nothing happened. He turned the lock in the opposite direction with the same result. On the third try he heard the sick sound of metal breaking. The knob just spun around freely now, no longer attached to anything.

Jim's heart raced wildly as he pulled on the heavy steel door. It was no use.

He was locked in. Trapped!

Jim's breathing started going out of control.

I'm going to give myself a heart attack, he thought. *And there's nothing I can do to stop it.*

A small part of him realized that it was an odd thought for a man in his early 20s. But a larger part felt like it was a real possibility.

"Calm down, you fool," Jim said out loud. "Calm down."

He sat down in the corner and closed his eyes.

He focused on taking slow, deep breaths.

It took a few minutes but he was able to get his heart and lungs under control.

"It's gonna be all right," he said. "It might take a while, but I'll get out of here."

But then the thought started to creep in that no one would come for several days or weeks. That he would die in this bathroom.

He pushed away the fear to the edge of his mind.

He focused on making a list of things to try. The door. The screen. Check his pockets. *Too bad I put the backpack in the car. Still had water and snacks. Matches.*

It was getting cold.

At least it didn't smell too bad in here, Jim thought. That's not always the case in these places.

He tried not to think, just breathe. It was working. He was feeling better.

He opened his eyes and looked around. There was a steel grate at the top of the door. Maybe he could climb up and loosen the screws that held it in place. Clearly the lock was old. Maybe he could kick the door down. Maybe someone would come around and help.

Why had he locked the door? There was no one around. Who was he trying to keep out?

It started to get dark outside. And inside. The bathroom had no lights. It was getting cold, too. A dark fog began to seep in under the door. Jim felt a chill creep in through his moist T-shirt.

His hands hurt. He had tried everything he could think of. The lock may have been old but was still a match for his best kick or shoulder charge. The screws holding the steel grate to the stone were rusted tight. Jim just managed to cut himself trying to get them to budge. The parking lot was as quiet as death.

Why had he locked the door?

After the initial panic left, Jim settled down to passing the time. It would be uncomfortable and boring, he decided. But he would get through it.

After night fell, Jim heard something outside. It sounded like someone crying out in the forest. The faint, eerie sobbing filled Jim with dread. What was someone doing out here at that hour? And why were they crying? Jim thought about calling out but decided to wait.

The sobbing only got louder and closer. Soon it sounded like it was coming from just outside the door.

Jim was too frightened to say anything. He just sat there shivering in the dark.

And then the fog, glowing now, started coming through the steel door. Not under but *through* the actual door.

And then to his horror, Jim watched as the fog formed itself into the shape of a person. After a few moments Jim could make out a white-haired old man.

"Get me out of here!" the ghostly old man shouted. "For God's sake, get me out of here!"

He huddled in the corner, tears staining his wrinkled cheeks. He didn't seem to see Jim.

There was something almost familiar about the old man. Jim was sure he had never seen him before. And yet there was something there. There was something about the old man. Jim felt like he knew him somehow.

The night seemed to go on like this forever. The old man was quiet from time to time, but then he would suddenly cry out again.

"Get me out of here! For God's sake, get me out of here!"

Jim finally nodded off somehow sometime around dawn.

He heard a noise outside, coming from the direction of the parking lot. Rubbing his eyes, he saw that the ghost of the old man was gone.

There was a knock at the door.

"Hello," Jim said. "Do you think you can get me out of here? The lock is broken."

"Hold on," a voice said. "Let me see what I can do."

A few minutes later, the door opened wide.

"My goodness, sir," the park ranger said. "You're lucky I came along. Not many people hike this trail this time of year. I empty the trash and check the bathroom about once a month during the off season."

"Thanks, man," Jim said.

"No problem, sir," the ranger said. "You have a good one."

Jim pulled his pack out of the trunk and slid behind the wheel. He took a long drink of water and wondered why the ranger kept calling him *sir.* The man was at least twice Jim's age. Then he looked in the rearview mirror and dropped the water all over his pants. Jim's face was covered in wrinkles and his hair had turned completely white.

He looked just like the ghost of the old man.

AAAH!

Won't Get Ghouled Again, Again

The ghoul is no common fool.
He waits for you after school.
You taste the fear when you hear
Him whispering in your ear:
"I bet your corpse will taste sweet.
I think I'll start with your feet."
Look both ways when you cross the—

[Slap one hand with the other suddenly and loudly.]

The
O. Penn-Coughin
Collection…

THEY'RE COMING FOR YOU Series
Scary Stories that Scream to be Read
More Scary Stories that Scream to be Read
Scary Stories that Scream to be Read… Thrice
Scary Stories that Scream to be Read… Forthwith
Scary Stories that Scream to be Read… Campfire Edition
Scary Stories that Scream to be Read 6
Scary Stories that Scream to be Read… Bloody Valentine Edition
Scary Stories that Scream to be Read, Box Set, Vol. 1-3
Scary Stories that Scream to be Read, Box Set, Vol. 4-6
Scary Stories that Scream to be Read, Ultimate Box Set, Vol. 1-6
A Very Scary Christmas

WELCOME TO HELL Series
Kissed by a Clown
Demon at My Window
Being Zak Bagans

Vampire Ghost

Available wherever eBooks are sold

Download
The Scary Story Podcast
free on iTunes

Visit O. Penn-Coughin
at CoughinBooks.com
and follow him on Twitter
@OpenCoffin

Now enjoy a free sample of
Kissed by a Clown…

Kissed by a Clown
(Welcome to Hell Series)

by

O. Penn-Coughin

Copyright © 2011 O. Penn-Coughin

YOU COME TOO PUBLISHING

WELCOME TO HELL
O. PENN-
COUGHIN
KISSED BY A CLOWN

For the students of South Baker—
No matter how hopeless things look,
always, always fight the clowns.

And God said, “Let the earth bring forth the living creature after his kind, cattle, and **creeping thing**, and **beast of the earth** after his kind.” And it was so.

Genesis 1:24

Send in the clowns. Don’t bother, they’re here.

Send in the Clowns
Stephen Sondheim

Kissed by a Clown

Based on true events

Chapter 1

The circus had come to Baker City.

Even in a small town like this, out here in eastern Oregon, out here in the middle of nowhere with a capital *N*, the circus didn't cause the excitement it once did. It couldn't compete against the rodeo or high school football or PlayStation or listening to the wind blow or sucking on a nail until you could taste the rust.

Over the last few days I had seen some of the performers in different parts of town—in front of the supermarket, at gas stations, on street corners—handing out coupons. And now on this first Friday in October a van full of clowns had shown up at the school.

At first the students were glad to be out of class, and the 4th graders were all about it, but it didn't take long for boredom to spread through the crowd like runny peanut butter. A clown on a unicycle, clowns tripping over themselves, a clown juggling, a clown squirting the kids in the front row with water from his plastic lapel flower, and a mime—a mime in the 21st century?—wasn't getting it done.

"The lamest show on earth," Jason whispered loudly a few minutes into the assembly. "I mean, the circus is so over. Like more over than Peyton Manning."

The Gaston twins, apparently big Peyton Manning fans and just plain big, turned around and gave him soiled looks while pounding their fists into their meaty hands.

I didn't answer. I wasn't a fan, but I wasn't sure Peyton Manning was through yet. More importantly, I didn't like clowns.

I didn't like clowns ever since that day in the park when a clown took me into the woods.

I was four and had been playing on the slide. And then someone called my name. I looked up and saw a clown standing in the trees. He had no hair and wore a tiny party hat at an angle held on by a thin elastic band. He was smiling.

Forgetting everything my mother had ever told me, I went over to him. He reached out his big gloved hand and we walked down a dirt path through the dark forest. Then he stopped and faced me.

"Ever been kissed by a clown, Danny?" he whispered, his painted face inches from my nose. "It's to die for."

His empty eyes suddenly turned evil, bottomless and black. He had the tiniest ears I had ever seen on an adult, smaller than mine at the time, no bigger than a baby's. His breath smelled of cigarettes and alcohol. Sweat pooled under his rubber nose. The small red hairy triangle above his chin came closer and closer. I looked down at the ground but all I could see were his big floppy, mud-covered shoes. My stomach was about to lose it and my pee was putting on its running shoes.

And then my mother's yells closed in from behind.

"Danny. Where are you, Danny? Danny!"

"Adults are always spoiling things," the clown said with a sigh. "No worries, though, we'll meet again."

He let go of my hand. When I looked up again, he was gone.

I stood there, crying.

Other kids hadn't been so lucky.

A dozen children disappeared that year in Northern California. (That's why my folks ended up moving to Baker City.)

I did my best to help the police sketch artist. But I couldn't provide too many particulars. To me he was just big and scary. I didn't tell them what he said. I never told anyone.

One day a man walked in to a police station and confessed. He refused to say what he did with the bodies, which were never found, but he got the death penalty.

The clown's been dead for two years, but I still have dreams about it now and then, and whenever I see a clown, I can't help but thinking that I could have been one of those kids.

“You all right, man?” I heard Jason saying next to me. “You look like you’ve seen a ghost. I’ve always wanted to say that by the way. But really, you do look as white as Peyton Manning. You all right, Dan? Dan?”

Jason seemed to be obsessed with Peyton Manning lately but he probably had a point. I didn’t feel my personal best.

“Yeah,” I said after a few seconds. “I’m fine.”

“Check out this freak,” he said.

I looked up on stage. One of the clowns was holding the microphone. He was surrounded by the other clowns. All clowns look the same to me—I usually don’t spend enough time looking at them to see details—but there was something different about this one. The freakishly small party hat sitting that way on his large white bald head. The tiny, infant-sized ears. The little red soul patch below his lower lip. And the eyes. There was something about those eyes.

He looked at me and smiled through his yellow teeth.

“Remember, kids,” he said. “These tickets will get you into the circus for free when you’re accompanied by a paying adult. Hope to see you there. *It’s to die for*.”

The vomit came up my throat.

Chapter 2

"Sloppy Joes," Jason said as we walked home, putting absolutely no effort into holding back his amusement. "Man, you nailed Rebecca Wynter in the back of the head with a steaming pile of secondhand Sloppy Joes in front of the whole school. Oh, man."

He stopped to wipe the tears from his eyes.

"She must have felt like the guy in that urban legend who gets hit by the exploding canister of biscuit dough in the back of the head," he went on. "She must have thought she was dead."

"Probably just wished she was," I said.

"I know you like her," he said. "But really, bro. Still, I suppose that's one way to get her attention. A real sick way."

He kept laughing.

I wasn't ready to join him, although my stomach did feel a little better.

But I still had that bitter vomit taste in my mouth from, well, the vomit, and from what I had done to Rebecca. I had to find a way to make it right with her. She hadn't seemed too pleased the last time I saw her walking out of the office, hair still wet, wearing an old shirt the nurse had found for her. I had to admire the dignity she had shown. A lot of other people would have cried or screamed or freaked out. But she kept it together. It made me like her even more and I promised myself that I would make it up to her. But that was going to have to wait.

First I had to wrap my head around what I had just seen and heard. Or what I thought I had just seen and heard.

Had it really happened that way?

Had I created the whole thing in my head, the result of a runaway imagination fueled by bad cafeteria food? Had the police gotten the wrong man? Or was it just coincidence? Couldn't two completely different clowns, hundreds of miles and several years apart, look alike and be able to say "It's to die for" without me losing my lunch? (Don't answer that.)

A cold breeze blew down the street and dark clouds covered the Elkhorn Mountains as I turned down my block.

"See you tonight, Sloppy Joe," Jason said.

"Not if I see you first," I said feebly.

When I walked in the house, my mom came rushing up to me.

"Are you all right?" she said, feeling my forehead.

"Word travels fast 'round these parts I reckon," I said in a western accent. "Yeah, I'm fine. More embarrassed than anything."

"Oh, that will pass," she said. "You don't seem to have a fever. That's good."

I was quiet for a moment, thinking about how she would probably raise a stink about me going over to Jason's later.

"Say, Mom, hypothetically speaking, could you ever end up liking someone who threw up on you?"

"Boy, this is serious," she said, smiling. "If you're getting all hypothetical on me. Let me see? Could I ever end up liking someone who threw up on me? That's an easy one. I like *you*, don't I?"

She then reminded me of all the times I spit up on her as a baby. (I guess I had a nasty habit of hurling on the women in my life.)

"Thanks, Mom," I said. "Oh, and can I still go over to Jason's later? It's the opening of our film festival."

"Maybe, if you promise to lay off the Cheetos."

This was the third year of our Stephen King festival. Every Friday in October we would watch a different movie based on one of his stories. When it came to scary movies, Stephen King was the Man. Some of them were beyond awesome and others not so much. But it was always a good time. Even the bad ones—and there seemed to be a lot of them—were fun just because they were so bad. We talked about stuff and drank sodas and ate too many Cheetos. At first it was just Jason and me, but there were now five regulars in our group.

We would take suggestions from the other guys, but being the founding members, Jason and I had final say on what we were going to watch. We still hadn't decided on tonight's movie.

"How's it staying down, Slop?" Jason said as he opened the door. "Oh, wait, it's not."

He started laughing again and I fake punched him in the gut.

"All right," I said. "I suppose I'm gonna have a hard time living down that little incident."

"Hard? Try impossible."

"So what's it going to be tonight?" I asked.

Jason held up the *Pet Sematary* DVD.

"How's this sound?"

"I want to play with *yeeooou*," I said, quoting the super creepy little kid in the movie.

"No fair," he said back at me.

"Hey, when are they going to release that bad boy in Blu-ray?"

"Beats me."

Gabe and Tony hadn't seen it, so it was fun to see their reaction. It still held my attention after almost 20 viewings. I didn't think about the clown once. My stomach felt fine, but I still followed Dr. Mom's orders regarding the Cheetos. I knew she would check me for orange fingers later.

"That was a good one," Tony said. "Too bad there's only four Fridays this October."

"How 'bout we include the last Saturday of the month this year, too?" Jason said.

After that was settled we took turns trying to speak with a Maine accent.

We had to stop when Gabe busted everyone up with his Cartman version.

"You know, guys," he said. "Sometimes dead is better. Ayuh."

"That was epic in school today, Dan," Eddie said a minute later. "Just epic."

Everyone started laughing again, including me.

"I guess it was," I said.

I figured this was good practice for what was waiting for me back at school on Monday.

After we stopped laughing, Tony asked what we were going to watch next week.

"How about *It*?" Gabe said.

"You're kidding, right?" Jason said. "That movie blows more chunks than Dan here. No offense, Slop."

"None taken," I said. "But see what you can do about not calling me *Slop*."

"Sure thing, Slop."

"That's what I thought."

"That clown is scary," Tony said.

"Yeah," Jason said. "He's scary for about five seconds—and then you have to sit through three more hours of pure torture."

"I hear the book is a lot better," Eddie said.

"Does the clown turn into a giant spider in the book?" Jason said.

"I don't know," Eddie said. "I haven't read it."

"Well, if it does, you keep that book far away from me," Jason said. "The clown turning into a giant spider sucks. Why not an ostrich or a ladybug? What were they thinking? So to answer your question, I guess, no, we won't be watching *It* anytime soon."

"How about *Storm of the Century* and could we please talk about something other than clowns?" I said on behalf of my stomach, which had suddenly started to feel more than a bit queasy.

"Say, speaking of clowns," Gabe said. "Is anybody going to the circus?"

"Ah, jeez," I said. "I'm going home. That's where I'm going. I'll see you guys tomorrow."

"See ya, Joe," Jason said. "I mean, Dan."

The cool night air felt good. I walked slowly for the first block, looking up at the star-filled sky and thinking of Rebecca in that old shirt. Then I heard someone walking behind me. Their feet made a loud sound when they hit the ground, like giant *clown* shoes slapping at the sidewalk.

SLAP.

SLAP.

SLAP.

I ran the rest of the way without looking back.

Chapter 3

It's late November. A bunch of us are watching a movie at the Eltrym, the town's lone theater. Rebecca is sitting next to me.

I don't remember what's playing. It's not important.

Rebecca whispers something in my ear.

"Ever been kissed by a clown, Danny?"

I look over at her.

It's Rebecca. Her hair, her clothes, her voice.

"What's that?" I say, thinking I must have heard wrong.

"Ever been kissed by a clown?" she repeats, louder this time, leaving no doubt.

My heart begins to pound like the drum in that old song my mom likes by Phil Collins.

Then she turns slowly. I can see her face now. But it's not her face. It's not Rebecca. It's the clown. I try to get up, but I can't move. He pulls me in, closer and closer and closer until his lips are pressing against mine. I try to scream, try to push him off. But all I can do is taste the—

"Aaah!"

I woke up screaming.

A few seconds later my dad was standing in the door frame.

"You all right, Dan?"

"Yeah," I sighed. "Bad dream, I guess."

"You want to talk about it?" he said.

"No, I'm okay."

"All right, then. Try to get some sleep. We've got the early game tomorrow."

As I stared up at the ceiling I thought about how some other parents might have blamed my nightmare on the movie I had been watching a few hours earlier. I liked how my dad didn't jump to conclusions and overreact to things. (Except when it came to soccer.) I wished at that moment he had passed that trait on to me.

But was I overreacting?

Alone, in the dark, anything seemed possible. Especially bad, terrible things. Things like evil clowns coming back to life.

I slept walked through the game the next morning, a real zombie in cleats.

"C'mon, Dan!" my dad shouted as I wasted yet another pass to me in front of the goal. "Focus!"

Things almost turned around for me on the last play of the game. The score was still 0-0. Jason, our keeper, made an awesome save and kicked the ball all the way down the field. I trapped the ball with my left foot, bringing it down as sweet as Mrs. Butterworth. Then I flicked it over the last defender's head and raced in all alone toward the goal. Time slowed and my senses came to life. I even thought I heard the small crowd drawing in its breath and the goalie's knees shaking.

I looked up one last time before shooting.

And that's when I saw him.

The clown was standing in the trees to the right of the goal. Just like that day all those years ago.

All the oxygen left my body. I fired the ball wide, closer to the corner flag than to the goal. The ref blew his whistle.

When I looked up again, the clown was gone.

As I walked slowly toward the sidelines, I saw the disappointed look on my dad's face. He stared at me and then shook his head.

"I hate to say it, man," Jason said a few minutes later. "But today you played bad enough to qualify for the U.S. men's team. Say hello to Tim Howard for me."

My only consolation was that I hadn't thrown up this time. So I had that going for me.

"You kept us in it the whole way, Jason," my dad said as we stood watching the teams warm up for the next game. "Really good game—which is more than I can say for some others around here."

Jason was the best goalie I had ever seen. Most keepers hung back by the goal line and waited nervously. Not Jason. He attacked the ball, coming out—way out sometimes—every chance he could, closing down angles, striking terror into the hearts of opposing forwards, forcing them to shoot before they were ready. Most times, they never even got off a shot. Jason just took it off their feet.

I knew Dad was going to hold a grudge over this for a while. He expected a lot out of me. Like I said, there was the easygoing way he felt about most things. And then there was the way he felt about soccer. I was cool with it. I expected a lot more out of myself, too.

"Your dad's all right, man," Jason said a few minutes later. "He gets on you because he cares. All my old man cares about is golf."

I thought about asking him if he had seen the clown when another question suddenly pushed that one aside: what if the clown was just in my head? Maybe I was losing it, cracking up. Maybe it was only a matter of time before my dad would have to find another striker because they would be measuring me for a different kind of uniform: a strait jacket. *Do you wear white?*

I bit my lip and stared off into the woods.

Chapter 4

I might have been losing touch with reality, but that didn't stop me from becoming a reality star at South Baker Upper Elementary. By Monday mine was the most famous vomit in five counties. Later Deb, my older sister, told me that even kids at the high school were talking about it. People smiled and laughed and called me Joe or Chuck or Stan (the *South Park* character who's always throwing up on his girlfriend).

"You'll come out of this stronger," my dad had said during breakfast. "Look at it as practice for middle school. And remember that if they see that it's bothering you, it will make them keep at you all the more."

"Plus, with attention spans being what they are these days," my mom said, "the next thing will come along and people will forget all about this."

"Wow, it's like you're the Justin Bieber of puking," Jason said at recess.

"C'mon, man. You know I hate that guy. I don't want to be the Justin Bieber of anything."

"Sorry, bro," he said, shaking his head. "I don't make the rules."

I had gotten to school early and raced over to Rebecca's locker. Making sure no one saw, I slipped the card into one of the vents.

It felt like I worked on it all night, but in the end the only thing I could come up with was: "I'm really sorry. I hope that someday you can forgive us. *Dan and his stomach*."

Lame, I know. I was really hoping they were right about it being the thought that counts. Because if it's the puke that counts—as I suspected it was—I was screwed.

I saw a few kids wearing circus T-shirts, just in case I needed reminding that the circus had come and gone, having made a real mess of my life, a mess of elephant turd proportions. But I was young, I told myself. I had time to pick up the pieces. Maybe by the time I turned 40.

In the meantime, I would focus on keeping my head down. I didn't look in Rebecca's direction all day, which wasn't easy. I was hoping to see a look in her eyes, some kind of sign that she had read my note and that things weren't completely, well, hopeless. But this had to be hard for her, too. Normally, you might expect people to show some sympathy for the victim of such a heinous crime. But this was 6th grade. I knew there would be no mercy for either one of us.

Three o'clock finally came around. Somehow I survived. I staggered out the door at the end of the day, woozy but still standing.

In this corner, from Baker City, Oregon, a voice announced in my head, *wearing green trunks and an even greener face, the undisputed champ of nausea, queasiness, and gastrointestinal distress … KID VOMIT*.

I flashed my title belt. The crowd went nuts.

Nuts like me.

I had a great soccer practice that afternoon. Everything I touched found the back of the net. I couldn't miss.

"Save some of those for the game," my dad said, smiling.

After practice, some of the guys got into the same argument we had been having since last year. Who was better, Messi or Ronaldo?

Tony made the mistake of picking Ronaldo.

"Yo mo crazy than Mourinho," Jason said, reaching over and pinching Tony's cheek.

"Mo crazy than Mo who?" Tony said, rubbing his face.

"You should know who that is, man," Jason said. "He's Ronaldo's coach on Real Madrid. He calls himself *The Special One.* A real loon, totally whacked, insane in the membrane."

"Well, I think *you're* insane in the membrane," Tony said. "Whatever that is."

I was surprised at how good I felt. It felt good to score, even if it was just practice, and to have the day behind me and to smile as the guys talked nonsense.

Nonsense. The word bounced around in my head. Everyone has their own nonsense. Why did my nonsense have to be so dark and serious? I needed to lighten up.

I had imagined the whole clown thing Friday afternoon. There was no other explanation. The circus clowns were real enough, but that was it. The rest was on me. And so what? I got a little worked up and carried away.

And who could really blame me after what happened to me as a little kid? Everyone's entitled to lose it a little now and then. And I don't mean little amount wise, like in the amount of vomit I lost that day. That was not little. I mean little in another way.

I just needed one more piece of proof before I could get on with my life. I had to check the news to see if there were any reports of missing children.

And then it hit me that Gabe wasn't at practice. Gabe never missed practice.

I texted him on the drive home. Then I began checking the internet.

Nothing. There was a story on the circus, but nothing about missing kids.

By the time I got out of the shower, Gabe had written back.

"Didn't feel like it. (Happy face.)"

Didn't feel like it? And what was that happy face about? That didn't sound like Gabe.

Oh, well, maybe Gabe was going through his own nonsense. No big thing.

I wasn't going to lose the contents of my stomach or sleep over it.

And I didn't.

Chapter 5

Things were pretty uneventful the next few days. The jokes and vomit references slowly started dying down.

There was a full moon Tuesday night. My teacher, Ms. Myles, said that the Native Americans called it the hunter's moon or the dying moon. To me it looked like a *Salem's Lot* moon. I didn't have to use too much imagination to see the skull showing through, like in the movie when the credits started to roll. As I stared up at it, I wondered if things like that ever really happened. Could a whole town get taken over by vampires? Yeah, right.

I saw Gabe at lunch Wednesday and asked him if he was going to be at practice that afternoon.

"I don't think so," he said with a big smile. "I don't see the point."

"What's that supposed to mean?"

"I have to go help my teacher now," he said, grinning again.

"Hey, did you see the Barcelona game Sunday? That was a crazy goal Messi scored."

"No, didn't see it," he said, walking away.

This just didn't sound like Gabe. He was always rushing through his lunch so he could get out to the yard and play soccer. It was in his blood, like it was in mine and my dad's. Now he was going to miss back-to-back practices and help his teacher instead of playing? Weird.

Maybe he's just going through a phase, I told myself.

We had social studies in the afternoon. Ms. Myles was really into social studies.

"Most people still think the Civil War was fought to free the slaves," she said, her eyes lighting up. "But that's just not true. It was about power. It's pretty much always about power. Power and money. Which is really the same thing. Now, I'm not saying Lincoln didn't want to free the slaves. He did. And once that terrible war started he made sure that something good came out of it—the end of slavery. I'm just saying that it wasn't the cause of the war."

"Oregon State!" Logan shouted.

"C'mon, fool," Riley said. "Oregon State can't touch the Ducks."

"Please, boys," Ms. Myles said. "Not *that* Civil War."

The whole thing got me started thinking about Titus Andronicus, one of my favorite bands. Their second album was made up of songs about the real Civil War, the one Ms. Myles was talking about. It was a weird idea for punk rockers, but the music was killer.

"Why are there two *L*s in Lincoln?" Mark said.

"Did you see that *Lincoln Lawyer* movie?" Jesse said.

"That Matthew McConaughey is pretty hot for an old guy," Emily said. "I think I would let him, uh, defend me."

"I guess I would, too," Ms. Myles said. "But I object to the "old guy" reference. Why, he's younger than—. Okay, okay, let's try to focus here. Order in the court."

"I'll take an order of fries," Jesse said. "From DQ."

"DQ?" Mark said. "Child, please. What this town needs is a *Burgerville*. Now, they know fries."

Outside a few snowflakes started falling. That Titus Andronicus video for *A More Perfect Union* started playing in my head. Guitar. Guitar.

Thursday was a good day. A really good day. When I opened my locker in the morning, I found a note.

"Thanks for the card. My grandfather got me that *Gold and Ghosts* shirt. It was one of my favorites, but I'll try not to hold it against you or your stomach. *Rebecca*."

Yes.

Yes, yes, yes!

"Have you become one of those smiley types, too?" Jason said before class started. "I mean, you look happier than Josh Ritter."

"Huh?"

“You’ve got a giant clown smile plastered on your face,” he said. “Just like a lot of people around here lately.”

“I don’t know what you’re talking about, man. I’m just happy.”

“That’s what they all say,” he said. “Why the glee?”

“I’ll tell you about it later.”

He was right. I had a real village idiot thing going on. I could feel it. I didn’t care. I kept smiling.

But as the day went on, my brain slowly started to put together what Jason had said with what I was seeing. There seemed to be a lot people walking around with big smiles. Like Gabe and his teacher, Mr. Stanton, and the lunch lady and the Gaston twins and a few kids in my class and more than a few fourth graders.

Good for them, I thought. *Good for them.*

Nothing wrong with being happy. Nothing at all.

On the walk home, I told Jason about Rebecca’s note.

“Hey, man. Maybe it was destiny,” he said. “Did you ever think of that? Maybe you were destined to lose your cookies all over her that day. Maybe the puke was the catalyst that has set something beautiful in motion.”

“Where do you get this stuff, man?” I said. “Here all I’m trying to do is figure out her shirt size and you’re over there with your white coat in your lab coming up with scientific theories that weave together vomit and destiny.”

“I’m just saying.”

“Hey, Mom,” I said when I got home. “I need to buy Rebecca a T-shirt, but I don’t know her size.”

“It’s a tricky thing buying clothes for women,” she said. “If it’s too large or too small, feelings are hurt, and you can end up doing more harm than good. I would guess she’s a medium, though. That’s your best bet. If it goes wrong, you can blame it on me.”

“Thanks, Mom.”

I looked for it at the downtown shops near my house first. Then I rode my bike down Campbell Street. I was at the end of the line, and fresh out of stores, when I walked into the visitors’ center at the edge of town. I had never been inside. The little gift shop section could have fit inside a medium size bathroom and kind of smelled like one. But there it was. A big stack of *GOLD AND GHOSTS ALONG THE BYWAY* shirts.

I didn’t know if the woman behind the counter was smiling at me or just in general. It didn’t matter. I smiled back.

Good for her. Good for me.

Nothing wrong with being happy. Nothing at all.

Chapter 6

I've thought of a new drill for you, Dan," my dad said Friday morning.

"What's that?"

"Your left foot is pretty solid, but your right is still a little weak. So here's the plan: when you're playing at school, you shoot with your right foot only," he said, sounding excited. "Right foot only. It will be hard at first, but I bet you that in a few weeks you'll start to see a big difference. It'll give you a tremendous advantage over most players."

"Sounds good," I said.

"You know, even some of the world's best player's struggle with their off foot," he went on. "Like you, Messi tends to go to his left most of the time. We'll study it when we watch Barcelona play on Saturday."

I dream of clowns. My dad dreams of soccer. My mom dreams of traveling. My sister dreams of—I don't know. Makeup, I guess.

I put the brown paper bag containing the T-shirt on Rebecca's desk. I didn't want it to attract too much attention. I just put her name on the sack. No note. She would know who it was from.

I sat down and waited for her to come in.

"What's this?" she said softly a few minutes later as she looked in the bag.

Then I saw her smile. She looked over at me. I tried to keep my inner village idiot in check and nodded a slight Mona Lisa smile in her general direction. I hoped it didn't come across as a bobble head move.

Nothing wrong with being happy. Nothing at all. Bobble. Bobble.

It was cool outside. From my seat I could see the house across the street with its usual epic graveyard decorations on the front lawn. Inside, the heater cranked out a warm smoky sleeping gas, sucking out all the oxygen in the room. It smelled like someone was burning chicken feathers.

Ms. Myles had a quote from Martin Luther King, Jr. on the whiteboard: "The ultimate measure of a man is not where he stands in moments of comfort, but where he stands at times of challenge and controversy."

I was having trouble focusing on the words.

"What do you think Dr. King meant?" Ms. Myles asked.

"I think he was saying you should stand and give your seat on the bus to an old person," Logan said.

"You can't stand on the school bus, fool," Riley said. "And there ain't no old people on it anyway."

"There are different kinds of buses," Logan said. "Like the ones that take old people to the store."

"You're mental, man," Riley said.

"Maybe he was saying that it's more important what you do when the game is tied or when you're losing than what you do when your team is winning by a big score and the game's out of reach," Jason said.

"I think I know what you're trying to say," Ms. Myles said. "That's good, Jason."

"That's good, Jason," I mouthed at him mockingly.

"Or think about peace and war," she said. "Everyone loves peace during peace time. But maybe it's during war time, when it's not so popular, that people really need to embrace peace. I think it would be very interesting to see what would happen if we changed the rules of war. What if someone couldn't be a soldier until they turned 65? For one thing, I bet we would have a lot fewer wars."

Old people fighting. That was kind of funny. I was interested in what Ms. Myles was saying, but the heat was making me sleepy.

Soon the only thing keeping me awake was my minty green Barcelona road jersey, the one that looked like medical scrubs. Every time my eyelids got heavy, the jolt of looking down and seeing that mind-blowing, monkey dung color brought me back like a woozy boxer getting a sniff of smelling salts.

And yet, at some point, I found myself drifting. And dribbling…

I was going around the other players like they were those little orange cones. A deathly hush fell over the home crowd. The whole stadium sensed what was coming. Looking for blood, Marcelo's cleats came flying at me from the side. I jumped over them. One more defender to beat. *The measure of a man…* The measure of a

ball. I knew that the diameter of a soccer ball was approximately 22.6 centimeters. I instantly estimated the distance between Sergio Ramos's feet at a tick under a quarter of a meter. Just enough room. I nutmegged it beautifully through the opening between his legs and blew past him, meeting back up with the ball near the goal. I faked left, winked at someone up in the crowd, left Iker Casillas grasping at my shadow, and pushed the ball with my right foot ever so gently into the back of the net.

"Goooooooooooooooal!"

Dani Alves was the first one to run up and hug me. Messi was there a second later. Out of the corner of my eye I saw Mourinho screaming at one of his assistants.

"You guys know a good restaurant in this town?" I said, waving at Rebecca.

"Shakira and I like *El Amparo*," Pique said. "Quite romantic."

"*El cochinillo asado* at *Sobrino de Botín* is crazy good," Carles Puyol said, a crazy look in his eye, his crazy hair dancing crazily in the wind. "That roasted pig is a supreme work of art."

The public address announcer brought me back.

"Paging Dr. Snoozen. Paging Dr. U.B. Snoozen…"

It was Jason.

"Was it the one against Real Madrid again, where you school Sergio Ramos?"

I nodded, holding out the *FCB* badge on my jersey.

"That's always a good one," he whispered.

"The best."

Chapter 7

We had to start early with our movie that night because *Storm of the Century* is four hours long and my folks wanted me home by 10. It was one of my favorites. I had even named our cat Andre Linoge, after the main character.

Gabe and Tony didn't show up.

"Tony said he wouldn't be here," Eddie said. "When I asked him why, he just smiled."

"Maybe they're watching *It* together," Jason, said laughing. "Get *It*?"

"I don't know," I said. "Gabe seems to be out lately. I think he's given up soccer, too."

"There's definitely some weirding stones afoot," Jason said. "Get it, a *foot*?"

"Yeah, we get it," I said. "Now let's get watching."

"No, seriously," he said, getting serious. "What's with all those people smiling all the time? It's beyond weird. It's crossed over into Lady Gaga territory. I mean, it's Scary City out there."

"Pass the Cheetos," I said.

"What would you have done?" Eddie said four hours later. "If you say *no*, he kills everyone on the island and if you say *yes*, you're giving him—"

"Yeah, it's a real tough one," Jason said, his yawn drowning out the end of what Eddie was saying. "Sometimes there's no easy answer. It's like trying to stop Peyton Manning. If you blitz, he'll dump it off and bleed you to death with short little passes and if you sit back and wait, he'll pick you apart. Choose your poison. It's the same thing with Linoge. I'm talking about the old Peyton Manning, of course, because these days Peyton Manning is—"

"We know, we know," I said. "'Peyton Manning is so over.'"

"Couldn't have said it better myself, Dan," he said, smiling. "Couldn't have said it better myself."

"You know he's hurt, right?" I said. "Don't you think it's a little unfair to kick him when he's down and all? I mean, why not U2 is so over or Fernando Torres is so over?"

"No doubt the U2 wind chime machine has been over for like forever, and I hope it's not true about Fernando Torres. Personally I think he's still got a lot of goals left in him," Jason said. "But Peyton is so much fun, man. Watching that little pout he gets when he loses. It's priceless. I kid because I love. I wish him a full and speedy recovery. I love to watch him lose. Football just wouldn't be the same without him. I'm gonna really miss that guy."

"Whatever," I said.

"Dan, come on in here a minute," my mom said from our office the next morning. "Listen to the way Bowie's voice cracks when he says "nothing" here on *Heroes*. Can you feel the passion?"

She was listening to her old records again.

"Yeah, cool," I said.

"But that's not what I wanted to tell you. I went ahead and did it. I got your father his—our—Christmas present. Two tickets to Barcelona for February. I would have gone back to Florence personally, but you know how he loves Barcelona. So this way, he can go to some games and I'll still have plenty of museums to visit."

"Wow, now that's cool."

"Yeah, it kinda is, huh?" she said, smiling. "Okay, not a word."

"Got it," I said. "My lips are sealed."

"Our lips are sealed," she began singing while doing a weird little dance around the room.

I guessed it was another one of those old songs she liked.

Our game that week was against the first place team.

On the drive over my dad gave me one of his pep talks.

"This is a good team you're playing today," he said. "But right now anything's possible. It's like that magical time right before the World Cup begins. You can dream crazy, impossible things and no one can tell

you that they won't come true. You can dream that your team can win it all. But you can only whisper about it for fear that it will disappear like the fog burning off in the sun."

And then he finished by whispering, "Make the magic, Dan. Be the dream."

"You missed a good one last night," I said to Tony during warm-ups.

"That's okay," he said, a large, odd smile covering his face. "That's okay."

There was no feeling behind the words. It didn't fit the smile.

"Whatever."

"Like in practice," my dad said in our pregame huddle. "Just like in practice."

We played a good first half but it ended scoreless.

The second half was a different story. The roof caved in. For the other team.

We ran away with it, 5-0. I had a hat trick and an assist, including a header and a goal with my right foot.

"Just like in practice," my dad said after the game. "You guys can do magic when you focus."

Jason and I hung around afterwards, not wanting the feeling to end.

I thought about how fast things can change. It had only been a week since I had seen the clown. Or thought I had seen the clown. But it now felt like nothing more than an old, forgotten dream. Or like when someone asks if you remember something and you say, "No, not really." And you mean it.

Just another dead leaf carried away on a windy autumn day.

Chapter 8

My dad was right about Messi. He kept going to his left. The defenders knew where he was going to go, but they still couldn't stop him. Playing almost on one leg, he still scored two goals.

"Imagine if he worked on his right foot a little more," my dad said. "He would be better than Maradona and Pele put together. As it is, he's the best player in the world. And Jason's right. Anyone who thinks he's not *is* crazier than Mourinho."

To celebrate a great soccer weekend, my mom made paella, a rice and seafood dish from Spain. I thought it was cool how the clams opened up in the heat.

"Gross," Deb said. "You would."

"Maybe some anchovies next time," my dad said.

"You two are beyond sick," she said.

By Monday the vomit jokes had just about dried up. Only a few of the slowest kids still thought it was funny. I saw Rebecca walking down the hall wearing the *Gold and Ghosts* T-shirt. I smiled.

But I wasn't alone.

More and more people seemed to have come down with a serious case of the *happies*. It was impossible not to notice them. I guessed that about a quarter of the school was "infected." I knew that was a strange word to use, but it fit. It was like a flu going around that made people tired and lifeless, with eyes to match, and left them with a large, creepy smile that didn't seem to connect to anything they were feeling. In fact, they didn't seem to be feeling much of anything.

"I'm sick of this sh—" Jason said, slamming his locker.

"Easy there, Hoss," I said.

"No, man, something's going on," he said, his voice shaky. "This morning my dad put his golf clubs up for sale. And when I asked him if he was getting new ones, he smiled at me like all these freaks around here and said he was giving it up. My dad, giving up golf, Dan. That's nuts. He lives for golf."

"Are you guys having financial problems? There's a lot of that going around these days, too. Maybe he's just trying to find a way to save money."

"No, that's not it," Jason said. "Just last week he was saying how well his business was going."

"It kind of reminds me of Gabe," I said. "The way he doesn't play soccer anymore. Maybe it's got something to do with the changing of the seasons."

"The changing of the seasons?" he said, raising his voice. "The changing of the seasons! People are turning into smiling zombie freaks, giving up the things they love, and you're saying it's because of the changing of the seasons? That's weak, man. Get serious."

"You're right," I said. "I don't know what I was thinking. What do you think it could be?"

"I don't know, man, but whatever it is, I think it started with the circus."

"The circus? I don't understand."

"I don't understand it either," Jason said. "But this smiling epidemic started last week, just after the circus was here. I guess it could be a coincidence. But every time I look at these twisted ear-to-ear smiles, it reminds me of a clown."

I don't know why I hadn't seen it, given my history. But now that Jason pointed it out, I couldn't help feeling like I was surrounded by clowns. Dozens and dozens of them. As the goose bumps shot up my arms, I suddenly found it hard to breathe.

"Ms. Myles, haven't you noticed all these people smiling?" Emily said in class that afternoon.

"Yeah," Mark said. "Why is everyone smiling like a *retard?*"

He said the last word with a French accent.

"Now, Mark," Ms. Myles said. "You know I don't like that word."

"No, but just look around," Emily went on. "Tony, Heather, Megan, Will, Tyrone. They just sit there and smile all day long."

“Yeah,” Britney said. “I thought Dan was one of them, too. But I think he’s just *in love*. Look, he’s not smiling now.”

Everyone except for the kids Emily had mentioned turned to look at me.

“Oooh,” Logan said. “Burn.”

And it did.

Stay cool, I told myself. *Stay cool.* But my will wilted in the suffocating, scorching heat of her words faster than a vampire on the sunny side of Mercury. I felt my face grow hotter than a pizza when you bite into it too soon and it burns the roof off your mouth. I could almost feel the cheese melting up, up, up into my brain. The room started to spin. *Kid Vomit* was about to go down for the count.

My last thought was for Rebecca. I hoped her name wouldn’t be dragged into the conversation. I knew Britney didn’t like her. But I was hoping that shredding me to pieces with her claws would satisfy her appetite for now.

“Back, hater… back, rumormonger… back, ugly witch,” I heard Jason say through the ringing in my ears. “Your epic vat of vileness can’t touch Dan the Man.”

Jason was the real man. Wounded as he was, he still had my back. I vowed that should I live through this, I would help him find out what was going on.

“Maybe they’re just happy,” Ms. Myles said, trying to regain control of the situation. “You know they say people in small towns are happier than those in big cities. I know it’s like that for me. A day doesn’t go by when I’m not grateful that I live here. And, besides, who are we to question happiness?”

But as I felt the blood slowly leaving my ears, I thought that that was exactly what we needed to start doing.

Chapter 9

Things got stranger when I got home. Someone I almost didn't recognize was sitting on the couch.

It was Deb. She was staring off into space. Her face looked younger. At first I couldn't figure out what was different about her and then it hit me: she wasn't wearing any makeup. I couldn't remember what her face really looked like. It must have been years since I had seen it last. But now the makeup was gone. The raccoon black around the eyes, the fake-looking, uneven orange tan paint, the shiny lip stuff. All gone.

And in its place was a giant grin.

Deb's boyfriend came over that night.

"Hey, Dano," he said. "How's the Regurgitator?"

"The what?" I said. "Oh, yeah. Good one, guy. Deb, Frank's here!"

Deb came down the stairs slowly, wearing her big smile.

"Hey, you look different," Frank said. "Did you do something to your hair?"

It's her face, you idiot. Get yourself some glasses.

"Can you put the trash out, Dan?" Mom said a few minutes later.

"Frank already left," I said.

"Daniel Sebastian Rodgers," she said, a tone of serious disapproval in her voice. "You behave yourself, young man."

Then she started to laugh.

The clam shells from the paella and the used cat litter fought for my attention. I held my breath as I pushed the trash can out toward the curb.

I stopped when I saw them.

I had been wrong. Frank was still there in the driveway. He was leaning back against his car. Deb had her arms around his neck. She said something I couldn't hear. Then she leaned in to kiss him.

I was about to turn around and deal with the trash later, when I suddenly heard something I would never forget. The sound was coming from Deb. As she covered Frank's mouth with hers, she let out a terrible high-pitched shriek that sounded like a thousand bats screaming.

Frank tried to push her off, but she seemed to be too strong. Then he started shaking and convulsing like he was going to die.

After Deb was finished, Frank coughed two or three times and appeared to be fine, back to normal, like nothing had happened.

But then I saw his face under the streetlight.

He was smiling, smiling from ear to ear. He had the same sick smile as Deb and the rest of the zombies.

Shivering in the dark, I stumbled back to the house.

I heard that horrible shriek in my sleep. Smiles filled my dreams. Deb, Frank, Gabe, Tony, the kids from class. They were all there. And the clown was there, whispering in my ear.

"Ever been kissed by a clown, Danny? Ever been kissed by a clown, kissed by a clown, kissed by a clown, kissed by a clown…"

Chapter 10

"That's a crazy story, man," Jason said as we walked to school. "You're telling me that one minute your smiling sister's kissing her boyfriend and the next he's turned into one of these, these *things*?"

"Yeah, that's what I'm saying. It spreads through kissing."

As I heard myself say the words, though, it all sounded completely insane, like I had been reading too much R.L. Stine or watching really bad Stephen King—*The Langoliers* and the hedge animals coming to life in the TV version of *The Shining* came to mind—and it had all rotted my brain from the inside out.

"I've been looking for you guys," Eddie said, running up to us at recess. "I saw something weird last night."

"Take a number, man," Jason said.

"Remember those clowns that were here a few weeks ago? Remember the one in charge, the head clown?"

"Yeah, yeah, yeah," Jason said. "What about him?"

"That clown's living across the street from me."

"What?" I said. "What do you mean that clown's living across the street from you?"

"He moved into that old house that was for rent."

"When?" Jason asked.

"I don't know. I saw him there last night. And he was still dressed like a clown."

I jumped when the recess bell sounded.

"Are you thinking what I'm thinking?" Jason said to me.

"There's got to be a connection," I said.

"A connection to what?" Eddie said.

"Got to be," Jason said.

We couldn't go to the cops yet. We had no proof.

Officer, I saw my sister kiss her boyfriend and it made him smile. Officer, a scary clown just moved in across the street. And it's no coincidence. Don't you see?

That wasn't going to get it done. Right now all we had was my word about what I had seen. It was enough for Jason, but other people were going to need proof. Real proof.

During lunch I told Eddie about Deb.

"You're saying the smiling is passed along by kissing?" he said. "I don't know, Dan. That's hard to believe."

"Believe what you want," I said. "Just don't let any of those smiling things kiss you. Don't find yourself alone with them, don't go to the bathroom here at school by yourself, and make sure to lock your room at night."

"We need to find out what the clown's part in this is," Jason said. "Most def he's behind this."

"Can we come over after school?" I asked Eddie. "We can spy on him from your house."

"Most def," he said. "Sounds like fun."

Most def Eddie didn't know what he was talking about.

We watched the house from Eddie's room for several hours, but nothing happened. The clown didn't make an appearance and the house was dark. It still looked like no one lived in it.

"Are you sure you saw him?" I finally said.

"Positive, man."

"How do you know he moved in and wasn't just looking at the house or visiting someone else?"

"Because Old Man Matson told my dad we have a new neighbor," Eddie said. "Called him one of 'them circus fellas.' If he says it's true, it's true."

Eddie had a point. Old Man Matson knew everybody's business. Most times even before they did. He reminded me of *Weasel* from *Salem's Lot*.

"Hey, maybe tomorrow we can go to the newspaper and see if they know anything," Jason said.

"That's a good idea," I said.

“What are we going to watch Friday night?” Eddie said.

“How about *Salem’s Lot*?” Jason said.

“I was thinking the same thing,” I said. “The original?”

“You know it, homie.”

We struck our fists together.

The remake was pretty good and we watched it some years, but it couldn’t touch the first one.

When I got home I checked the internet to see if there were reports of smiling breakouts in other parts of the country. I couldn’t find any. I didn’t see any posts on Twitter about it either, except for a few from people I knew here in town.

Whatever was going on seemed to be confined to Baker City.

The *clowned*, as Jason started calling them, kept multiplying. By Wednesday it seemed like one out of every three people at school had been turned.

I was torn about Rebecca. Part of me wanted to warn her. But when I thought about what I would tell her, when I rehearsed the words in my head, it all sounded way too crazy. In her eyes, I was still a fountain of vomit. I didn’t want to come across as a geyser of insanity, too.

We needed more proof. And we needed it soon. The way things were going, the whole town would be infected before the end of the month. Before Halloween.

Chapter 11

Jason and I stopped at the Baker City *Herald* office after school.

"How can I help you boys?" the man behind the counter said.

"We'd like some information," I said.

"Fire away."

"Have you noticed people acting weird lately?" Jason said. "Smiling a lot, walking around like zombies?"

"Weird? Zombies?" the man repeated. "Sounds like someone's been watching too many Halloween movies. But now that you mention it, the folks at the chamber of commerce are working on a plan to change the town's welcome sign. They want it to read, 'Baker City: The Smiliest Place on Earth.'"

"Smiliest?" Jason said. "Is that even a word?"

"Don't you think that's kind of strange?" I said.

"I stopped thinking anything them government folks do is strange a long time ago," the man said. "Now I've got to get back to checking tomorrow's classifieds. You two stay out of trouble, ya hear? And watch out for those—what did you call them?—zombies."

We stepped back outside. A chilly wind rattled the Halloween decorations that lined Main Street. Dark clouds hung over the mountains. It looked like a storm was blowing in.

"That was helpful," I said as we turned onto Eddie's street.

"Yeah, about as productive as Peyton Manning pretending to change the play at the line," Jason said. "12-42-12-42-clown-shoes-clown-shoes-big-red-floppy-floppy-set-hut-hut—"

He dropped back like he was going to pass an imaginary football, but then he stopped suddenly and brought his hands down by his side. He was staring at something down the street. I looked up and saw it, too.

The clown was coming toward us.

I could have sworn that a second before there hadn't been anyone on the sidewalk, but the clown was now almost on top of us. There was no time to hide. We just stood there as he walked right up to us.

"Howdy, gents," he said, handing us each a flyer. "Fine day for a walk."

I lost the feeling in my legs. I was four all over again. My mind ran down the street screaming: *It's him! It's him! It's him!*

"You look so familiar," he said, looking right at me with those dead black eyes and scratching his red soul patch with long yellow fingernails. "Oh, yes, it was that unfortunate incident with the Sloppy Joe's, wasn't it? What a shame. All that fine mystery meat gone to waste."

He winked and smiled, showing off his crooked mustard-colored teeth with large dark gaps in between. Then he starting laughing, his whole body rocking back and forth.

"Well, *ciao* for now. But only for now."

A moment later he was halfway down the block. I tried to read the flyer but my hands were shaking too badly.

"Smiles the Clown, available for parties and all your special occasions," Jason said. "Sure to leave them smiling."

He had just been messing with me when he said I looked familiar. Sure he was referring to our recent school encounter, but there was something more. We knew each other long before then. I knew he remembered me from that day in the park all those years ago. I sure as hell remembered him. I had no more doubts now. No questioning my sanity or blaming my imagination.

I couldn't stop shaking.

It was him. He was real. And he was here in Baker City.

Somehow—as impossible as it seemed—Smiles the Clown had come back from the dead.

[End of sample. *Kissed by a Clown* is available wherever eBooks are sold.]

The
O. Penn-Coughin
Collection…

THEY'RE COMING FOR YOU Series
Scary Stories that Scream to be Read
More Scary Stories that Scream to be Read
Scary Stories that Scream to be Read… Thrice
Scary Stories that Scream to be Read… Forthwith
Scary Stories that Scream to be Read… Campfire Edition
Scary Stories that Scream to be Read 6
Scary Stories that Scream to be Read… Bloody Valentine Edition
Scary Stories that Scream to be Read, Box Set, Vol. 1-3
Scary Stories that Scream to be Read, Box Set, Vol. 4-6
Scary Stories that Scream to be Read, Ultimate Box Set, Vol. 1-6
A Very Scary Christmas

WELCOME TO HELL Series
Kissed by a Clown
Demon at My Window
Being Zak Bagans

Vampire Ghost

Available wherever eBooks are sold

Download
The Scary Story Podcast

Visit O. Penn-Coughin
at CoughinBooks.com
and follow him on Twitter
@OpenCoffin